

EXPOSITORY STORY SERMONS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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MAY, 2008

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the theological and theoretical rationale behind expository story sermons. This study is important because we live in a story-culture. Wise preachers know their audience. Those who want to effectively communicate the word of God to the people who are immersed in this story-culture should be able to preach a story sermon. The result of this study is a manual in chapter five on how to prepare and deliver an expository story sermon.

CHAPTER I

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

Professional storyteller and pastor, Tommy Oaks opens a storytelling event like this: “When I was a boy I went to church a lot. The preacher always seemed to have three points and a story. I couldn’t tell you what the points were later that afternoon, but I always remembered the story. Tonight I want you to remember what I am going to say so I am going to tell three stories and make one point.”¹ Telling stories to make a point is not a new concept. From Aesop’s Fables to grandma’s stroll down memory lane, stories make points and teach ideas. The stories of the Bible also make points—theological points. In Luke 15 for instance, Jesus told three stories to convey one idea: God rejoices when the lost are found.

Some stories are told in books or spun from easy chairs or from logs encircling burning embers with toasted marshmallows. Jesus told stories from boats and mountaintops and around the dinner table. It seems that regardless of location, a story is a good way to convey an idea to an audience. This thesis argues that a story can effectively communicate a biblical idea from the pulpit. A single story or a series of stories can serve as an expository message, an expository story sermon.

The latter part of the 20th century has seen an increasing interest in narrative. Some would argue that a shift toward narrative has occurred in the way in which we communicate as a culture and in the way in which we understand theology. These

¹ Stonebridge Newsletter, “Tommy Oaks, Story-teller,” <http://kenpierpont.com/2006/06/tommy-oaks-story-teller/> (accessed May 26, 2007).

shifts have implications for homiletics, particularly in the area of narrative preaching.²

Some communication experts argue that we are now in the midst of a shift in culture: "...US theologian, Harvey Cox, notes the appearance in our time of 'post-literate man.' The Age of Writing is over, he says. The visual electronic image has replaced the written word as the crucial unit of communication."³ Colin Morris asks "How can the Gospel be preached to a post-literate society in which the image is the principal currency of communication? How will Protestants especially, who proudly claim the title of People of the Book, fare when they encounter head-on the People of the Screen?"⁴ Walter Ong, a communications scholar, has argued that our culture has moved from an oral culture, to a literate culture and now to a secondary-literate culture, or electronic culture. Surprisingly, this electronic culture is similar in many ways to the oral culture.⁵ In his book, *Thinking in Story*, Richard Jensen argues that preachers should respond to the newly emerging oral culture:

Communication experts are generally in agreement that there is much about our post-literate culture which is like early oral culture. Walter Ong, for example, calls our era a "secondarily oral" era. Primarily we are talking here about the return of sound with radio and television. The ear is put back to work. A strictly literate era needs no ear; only eyes. I suggest, therefore, that we can learn much about preaching in our time from the earliest oral era of human communication. People in those cultures thought in stories. Thinking in stories is one way that we can structure sermons for people in a post-literate world. In a sense we go "back to the future." The thinking mode of oral cultures of long ago holds some possibilities for our preaching in an electronic culture."⁶

² David Allen, "A Tale of Two Roads: Homiletics and Biblical Authority" in JETS Vol 43, No.3, pp. 489-515.

³ Colin Morris, God in a Box (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ Walter Ong, "Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media," in David Crowley and Paul Heyer, Communication in History (New York: Longman, 1999), 60-67.

⁶ Richard Jensen, Thinking In Story (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), 9.

Such a shift in culture might pose new questions for the study and practice of homiletics.⁷ How should homiletics respond to such a change in culture? Richard Jensen argues that ‘thinking in story’ is the way in which a ‘secondarily oral’ culture communicates. This thesis will explore how homiletics might respond to our story culture by understanding and applying the elements of effective modern-day storytelling to expository story sermons.

Target of this Thesis Project

This thesis will address lessons that can be learned from modern-day storytelling and applied to the preparation and delivery of expository story sermons. The outcome of this project will be a manual used by Bible college and seminary students; by pastors who wish to preach story sermons, and by teachers of homiletics who want to prepare students to be effective preachers in our story culture. The second and third chapters of this thesis address the theological and theoretical rationale for the proper use of storytelling principles in expository story sermons. The fourth chapter of this thesis-project is the manual. The manual will address the methodology involved in preparing and delivering expository story sermons.

This project is concerned with expository story sermons. What can be gleaned from the study of modern-day storytelling and applied to expository story sermons? How might the preacher remain faithful to the biblical text and relevant to the ‘secondarily oral’ audience? Since the words ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ are often associated with childlike images, how might the preacher convince the congregation that story is an acceptable sermonic form? The terms connote themes of make-believe, fantasy, and children’s play. Since expository story sermons are not

⁷ In *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, Scott Gibson edits a collection of essays designed to explore the issues faced by evangelical preaching in a changing culture.

traditional sermons, congregations might be uncomfortable or even hostile toward their use at eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning. Therefore, knowing the principles of good storytelling is essential to gaining and holding audience attention. Lessons learned from modern-day storytelling can improve the quality of expository story sermons. Understanding the principles of modern-day storytelling will help pastors identify, prepare and preach effective story sermons to audiences that are immersed in story.

Importance of the Study

This study is important because pastors need to continually find and use sermon forms that best communicate the idea of the biblical text to a particular audience. If our audience 'thinks in story' as Richard Jensen suggests, then story sermons can be an effective sermonic form to communicate biblical truth. Studying the elements of modern-day storytelling will help us to write and identify stories that can be used as effective expository story sermons. If we don't learn the best principles of storytelling, then we won't be able to write, identify and tell quality stories that clearly and faithfully convey biblical truth.

Using the Manual

The manual found in Chapter 4 of this thesis-project may be used as the primary text for teaching a course or seminar on expository story sermons. The instructor in homiletics may incorporate the information in the manual as a subsection of a broader course in preaching. The manual may also prove useful at pastor's conferences, seminars, workshops and clergy meetings.

Definitions

The following definitions will prove helpful when reading this thesis.

Expository: As defined by Harold Freeman, an expository sermon is one that “...confronts the hearers with an accurate interpretation of the biblical revelation and its present meaning for their lives.”⁸ Exposition has to do with the idea of the biblical writer and making it applicable in the world of the listener. Exposition requires exegetical skill in deciphering the meaning of the passage and hermeneutical skill in interpreting the passage with relevance for a modern audience.

Story: A story is a series of events having a beginning, middle and end.⁹ McKee describes storytelling as “...the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action.”¹⁰

Story Sermon: A story sermon is the telling of a story found outside of Scripture which is based on a biblical text.

Expository Story Sermon: the telling of a story found outside of Scripture that accurately relays the idea of the biblical passage and its’ relevance to the listener.

⁸ Harold Freeman, Variety in Biblical Preaching: Innovative Techniques and Fresh Forms (Waco, Texas: Work Book Publishers, 1987), 26.

⁹ Regarding the three components of story, Thomas Long says: “It is important...that we recognize the logical relationships among those three parts. The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning by resolving its situation of need. The end allows the reader to say, “Yes, this is ‘the end.’” Either by showing how the need described in the beginning has been met...” Preaching & the Literary Forms of the Bible, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 71-72.

¹⁰ Robert McKee, Story: Substance, Structure and Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting, (New York, New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1997), 113.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR EXPOSITORY STORY SERMONS

(Literature Review)

In exploring the theoretical rationale for expository story sermons the meaning of words is a significant concern. “Expository”, “story sermon”, and “storytelling”-- each of these terms is important in understanding this sermon form. The following pages will examine literature that relates to the various aspects of expository story sermons from their preparation to their delivery.

Survey of Literature Concerning Expository Preaching as it Pertains to Story Sermons

Story sermons are legitimate sermon forms. Jesus often told stories as a means of communicating His truth. Yet because of a story sermon’s shape and content, many people do not believe that story sermons fall under the category of biblical exposition. Story sermons don’t follow the shapes of traditional sermons because stories are inductive, not deductive. In regard to content, a story sermon is a narrative that is found *outside* of the Bible. Stories are not propositional. Furthermore, stories are engaging and entertaining. Fred Craddock points out that many people view preaching like grandmother’s view of medicine: “If it doesn’t taste bad it won’t help you.”¹¹ A story sermon’s non-traditional form and content leads some to question its expositional validity. It is important to understand expository preaching to evaluate whether or not a story sermon form can indeed be biblical exposition.

¹¹ Fred Craddock, Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 27.

There are many definitions of expository preaching, but most contain common elements. In 1999, Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix wrote their volume, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons*. The authors argue that the road to exposition begins with ‘careful exegesis’¹² followed by good hermeneutics. Careful exegesis and good hermeneutics lead the preacher to practice homiletics. “When delivery is added to this whole process of exegesis, hermeneutics, and homiletics, the result can be described as exposition.”¹³ This process results in an expository sermon. Vines and Shaddix define an expository sermon as “A discourse that expounds a passage of Scripture, organizes it around a central theme and main divisions which issue forth from the given text, and then decisively applies its message to the listeners.”¹⁴

In his seminal book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson says that “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearer.”¹⁵ After Robinson defines expository preaching, he develops his definition of exposition by unpacking five ideas: (1.) The passage governs the sermon (2.) the expositor communicates a concept (3.) the concept comes from the text (4.) the concept is applied to the expositor (5.) and the concept is applied to the hearers.

¹² Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 21.

In *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell endeavors to ‘redeem the expository sermon’ from two opposing foes. The first foe is a cultural climate that is antagonistic to authority.¹⁶ The second foe is moralistic preaching which is not rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.¹⁷ To help combat these foes, Chapell offers the following definition of expository preaching: “...a message whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text, and that explains the features and context of the text in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text.”¹⁸

Charles Koller describes five patterns for preaching: analysis, exposition, expository, textual and topical. An expository sermon as Koller defines it consists of analysis and exposition plus application and persuasion. It “...derives its main points...from the particular paragraph or chapter or book of the Bible with which it deals.”¹⁹ Koller argues that this type of sermon is organized around a proposition, or central idea.²⁰ According to Koller, expository preaching should be used most often: “No one method should be employed exclusively. But as a prevailing method, for year round ministering, expository preaching has the greater potential for the blessing and enrichment of both pastor and people.”²¹

Stephen and David Olford argue that the only authentic preaching is expository preaching. They define expository preaching as “...the Spirit-empowered

¹⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Charles Koller, *Expository Preaching without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 21.

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

explanation and proclamation of the text of God's Word with due regard to the historical, contextual, grammatical, and doctrinal significance of the given passage, with the specific object of invoking a Christ-transforming response."²²

In his classic book, *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott argues that expository preaching is the only true form of Christian preaching.²³ According to Stott, "To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor pries open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed."²⁴ Stott's concern is with exposing biblical truth as opposed to imposing one's own ideas upon the Bible. He writes: "In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said."²⁵

According to Sidney Greidanus, expository preaching is characterized by its use of the Bible as its source for preaching.²⁶ "At heart, expository preaching is not just a method but a commitment, a view of the essence of preaching, a homiletical approach to preach the Scriptures...in which...preachers seek to proclaim only that which the Scriptures proclaim."²⁷

²² Stephen Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1988), 69.

²³ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 125-126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

In his book *Variety in Biblical Preaching*, Harold Freeman suggests a user-friendly definition for biblical preaching: “Any sermon is a biblical sermon if it confronts the hearers with an accurate interpretation of the biblical revelation and its present meaning for their lives.”²⁸ Freeman’s definition combines exegesis of the biblical text with audience relevance and application.

A wide variety of definitions for expository preaching exist. In his book *Variety in Preaching*, Jeff Arthurs identifies five elements involved in expository preaching: (1.) The message finds its sole source in Scripture. (2.) The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis. (3.) The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context. (4.) The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture (5.) The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today.²⁹

Arthurs writes that the “...defining essence of an expository sermon lies primarily in its content, not its form.”³⁰ Regardless of form, a sermon that communicates the biblical truth of the passage and applies its relevance for today is expository. Not all story sermons are exposition, but they certainly can be. If a story sermon is not expository, then it is not a sermon at all! It remains only a story. A story sermon is expository when the biblical passage is accurately interpreted and the idea of the passage is properly identified. Then, based on solid exegesis, the idea of the biblical passage must be the same idea that comes through in the story sermon.

²⁸ Harold Freeman, *Variety in Biblical Preaching: Innovative Techniques and Fresh Forms* (Waco, Texas: Word Book Publishers, 1987), 26.

²⁹ Jeff Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2007), 204.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

For this thesis, when the story sermon accurately reflects the truth of the biblical passage and reveals its contemporary relevance, the story sermon is expository.

Since story sermons are stories that are found outside of Scripture, there is a danger that listeners will not make the connection between the story sermon and the biblical text. Elizabeth Achtemeier suggests that "...sermons of this type should have the scripture lesson read alongside them as the context for the evaluation and application of the narrative..."³¹ A reading of the scripture passage on which the sermon is based will not guarantee that the relationship between the story sermon and the biblical text is understood by the listener. The question then becomes, 'should the preacher make the connection for the listener?' According to Elizabeth Achtemeier, "...whether or not the preacher explicitly connects the scripture text with the narrative depends entirely on the artistic demands of the situation."³² The preacher must faithfully exegete the biblical text and apply its relevance to a modern audience. Even so, the sermon will fail if the listener is unable to see that the idea of the story sermon was derived from the idea of the biblical passage.

Survey of Literature on Exegesis as it Pertains to Story Sermons

The exegesis involved in preparing a story sermon is no less demanding than for a traditional sermon form. A story sermon can be crafted from any type of biblical literature, so an understanding of biblical exegesis is necessary to prepare an expository story sermon. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart define exegesis as "...the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original intended

³¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, Creative Preaching: Finding the Words (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1980), 84.

³² Ibid., 84.

meaning.”³³ Since a story sermon is an entirely different story than the biblical text, it is essential that the intended meaning of the text is known. When the text is correctly interpreted, then the preacher is able to choose a story sermon that accurately reflects the meaning of the text. In his book, *Exegetical Fallacies*, D.A. Carson urges preachers to take exegesis seriously: “We are dealing with God’s thoughts: we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly.”³⁴ When preparing for any type of sermon, including story sermons, biblical interpretation requires critical thinking and a careful handling of God’s word.

A story sermon can be preached from any type of biblical genre. Smaller portions of scripture like individual proverbs or one of the Ten Commandments are good sources for story sermons. A unit of thought from an Epistle can serve as the basis for a story sermon. The teachings and sayings of Jesus throughout the gospels might be best applied to a modern audience by a story sermon. In their book, *Inductive Preaching*, Ralph and Gregg Lewis refer to Jesus as the Master Storyteller: “He wouldn’t preach without a story, and most of those were *parables*. The New Testament records thirty-three to seventy-seven parables of Jesus, depending on your definition. He doesn’t use them merely as teasers, light introductions to get his hearers listening for what he really wants to say. They are often the primary expression of his message. Jesus’ little stories are tied to very big ideas.”³⁵

³³ Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, Reading the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 19.

³⁴ D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 15.

³⁵ Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1983), 69.

Although parables aren't the only genre from which to preach a story sermon, they are important to study to see how Jesus communicated his stories. Jesus' use of parables is most similar to story sermon preaching.

Putting a contemporary spin on a New Testament parable is also an effective use of a story sermon. A contemporary story can be used as a modern-day version of one of Jesus' parables. Numerous examples of this are found in the writings of author Philip Yancey.³⁶

Exegesis of a variety of biblical genres is a necessary skill for any preacher who wants to preach a story-sermon. A very helpful book in terms of exegesis is *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Doug Stuart and Gordon Fee.

Sidney Greidanus' book, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, serves as a helpful bridge between hermeneutics and homiletics. Greidanus discusses characteristics of biblical genre including Hebrew narrative, prophetic literature, the gospels and the epistles. He defines the literary characteristics of each genre and gives guidelines for preaching the genre.

In *Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible*, Thomas Long investigates the literary qualities of psalms, proverbs, narratives, parables of Jesus and epistles. He asks five questions of every text:

1. What is the genre of the text?
2. What is the rhetorical function of this genre?
3. What literary devices does this genre employ to achieve its rhetorical effect?
4. How in particular does the text under consideration, in its own literary setting, embody the characteristics and dynamics described in questions 1-3?

³⁶ See Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997)

5. How may the sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?

In his book *Preaching with Variety*, Jeff Arthurs “...describes the rhetorical dynamics of biblical genres and suggests how preachers can reproduce some of those dynamics in their sermons.”³⁷ Most helpful for preaching story sermons are the chapters on parables, proverbs and epistles.

In his book, *The Literature of the Bible*, Leland Ryken advocates a literary approach to the Bible. Ryken defines literature as “...an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form.”³⁸ *Biblical* literature, Ryken argues, is “...a collection or anthology of works written by a variety of writers over the span of many centuries.”³⁹ According to Ryken, a literary approach to the Bible is necessary because “... literature expresses truth in its own way, different from ordinary propositional discourse.”⁴⁰

Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman united to write *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. This massive volume represents equal contributions from two disciplines: biblical scholarship and literary scholarship. The introductory chapter benefits story sermon preachers in its discussion on literature and propositions.

Many important books have been written on biblical narrative: *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* by Adele Berlin; *The Art of Biblical Narrative* by Robert Alter and *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* by J.P.

³⁷ Jeff Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 13.

³⁸ Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁰ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature: And Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 13.

Fokkelman. Although story sermons are not primarily concerned with biblical historical narratives, the books just mentioned are important because they contribute to the overall understanding of the elements of story.

Survey of Literature Concerning Induction as it Pertains to Expository Story Sermons

Story sermons are inductive. Induction began to gain popularity in the 1970's with the publication of Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority*. Craddock argues that thought moves in only two directions: deductive and inductive. "Simply stated, deductive movement is from the general truth to the particular application or experience, while induction is the reverse."⁴¹

One of the reasons Craddock advocates induction is because of the dialogue it creates between preacher and listener. "Without question, preaching increases in power when it is dialogical, when speaker and listener share in the proclamation of the Word."⁴² This sharing is necessary, according to Craddock, because we no longer live in a world that accepts authority without question. "No longer can the preacher presuppose the general recognition of her authority as clergy, or the authority of her institution, or the authority of scripture."⁴³ Due to a cultural change in attitude toward preachers and preaching, Craddock calls for a new look at sermonic form, where method is inseparable from content: "...the sermons of our time have, with few exceptions, kept the same form. What message does such constancy of method convey? Either preachers have access to a world that is neat, orderly, and unified, which gives their sermons their form, or they are out of date and out of touch with the

⁴¹ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 45.

⁴² Ibid., 18.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

way it is. In either case, they do not communicate.”⁴⁴ Craddock urges preachers to learn from Jesus’ use of induction found in the New Testament parables.

In *Overhearing the Gospel*, Craddock expands his thought on indirect address by means of his conversations with Soren Kierkegaard. The book’s premise is based on this statement by Kierkegaard: “There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one man cannot directly communicate to the other.” In a culture that has ‘heard it all before’ the most effective way to communicate is through indirection.

H. Grady Davis says that induction “...leads through the particulars to adequate generalization...”⁴⁵ He argues that “Particulars have more “human interest” than generals.”⁴⁶ An entire sermon can be shaped inductively where the central idea is withheld until the end of the sermon. Davis points out that stories leading to generalizations are ancient and familiar literary forms.⁴⁷ “It is as old as Aesop’s fables, as contemporary as the fables of James Thurber and the *Rootabaga Stories* of Carl Sandburg, as significant as the final conversation between Nina and Marsden in O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*, or the comment on life by the dead at the end of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, or the post-mortem on Willy Loman that closes Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.”⁴⁸

William Bausch has tapped into the power of induction with his book, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*. Bausch’s aim in writing is “to rediscover the gospel values” and to find our “completeness in Christ” in stories, sacred and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁵ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1958), 176.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 177.

profane...”⁴⁹ Bausch includes a variety of tellable stories in his book. Many are from Jewish tradition.

Bruce Salmon wrote a helpful book called *Storytelling in Preaching*. Salmon gives an overview of the way in which stories are used in the Bible. He describes storytelling as an art form that ultimately must lead the listener to truth. Salmon also talks of the way that stories are used in preaching: deductively as examples to demonstrate a truth and inductively as illustrations. He gives a list of eight characteristics that make a good story:⁵⁰

1. A single, clearly defined theme
2. A single perspective from which the story develops
3. A well-formed plot which moves from calm to conflict to resolution
4. A use of realistic, graphic detail
5. An appeal to the senses whenever possible
6. A few major characters; lesser characters described only as necessary to the action
7. A reliance on direct speech; feelings and motives mentioned only when essential for the point.
8. A judicious use of repetition, with end stress; that is, the most important thing is described last.”

In his book, *Thinking in Story*, Richard Jensen argues that we live in a newly emerging oral culture where the ‘ear is put back to work.’ In this culture, preachers can learn

⁴⁹ William Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1999), 10.

⁵⁰ Bruce Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching: A Guide to the Theory and Practice* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Publishing, 1988), 39-40.

from storytellers. Jensen suggests that preachers "...can learn much about preaching in our time from the earliest oral era of human communication. People in those cultures thought in stories....The thinking mode of oral cultures of long ago holds some possibilities for our preaching in an electronic culture."⁵¹

In their book, *Inductive Preaching*, Ralph Lewis and Gregg Lewis say that Jesus, the prophets and apostles preached with an inductive accent.⁵² The authors argue that preachers should be aware of the needs of the audience. Inductive sermons involve listeners through discovery, experience and exploration.⁵³ "Homiletics has often ignored the audience...as if one message could and should fit all hearers in all conditions and all situations."⁵⁴

In his book, *Experiential Storytelling*, Mark Miller advocates experience in one's teaching and preaching. He says we live in an age of experience where "People want interaction, something that will jar them out of their monotony. They want to be touched, not by the numbing effect of a top-down monologue aimed at the mind, but by the power of a full-bodied personal experience."⁵⁵ He describes story as a powerful way to unleash experience by "touching human beings at the most personal level."⁵⁶ Miller says that "It is impossible not to notice the storytelling renaissance. Society is rediscovering the subtle power and beauty of story. And storytelling is everywhere. It is king in today's world of communication."⁵⁷

⁵¹ Richard Jensen, *Thinking In Story* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), 9.

⁵² Lewis and Lewis, *Inductive Preaching*, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵ Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God's Message* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan), 14-15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Many homiletics have written on the subject of induction and narrative preaching in recent years. In doing so, they have carefully studied the elements of story. Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* is a standard book for people interested in narrative preaching. In five stages⁵⁸, Lowry describes how a sermon can be shaped as a story, taking the listener from equilibrium to disequilibrium and back again to equilibrium. Lowry's homiletical plot clearly has roots in the monomyth.

In his book, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, Kent Edwards focuses on interpreting biblical narrative from a literary perspective. He uses the monomythic cycle as a guide to the writing of story-shaping sermons.⁵⁹

Lowry and Edwards' focus, however, is not on preaching story sermons, but using the elements of story to shape a sermon based on a narrative portion of Scripture. Their work is important to preachers of story sermons because both show how the elements of story are a powerful preaching tool.

PreachingToday.com is an important resource for preachers interested in preaching and storytelling. Numerous articles exist on topics such as: preaching and

⁵⁸ Stage one is the upsetting of the equilibrium. In this stage, the preacher is responsible for engaging the listener with the message. This is done by creating ambiguity, usually through conflict or tension. Lowry argues that human beings have a need to resolve ambiguity: "In mild doses it is a motivator both to attention and to action. One cannot breathe easily until some solution occurs. And when resolution comes, the result is both a knowing and a feeling." The second stage is one of analysis. The discrepancy that occurred in stage one is examined in order "...to uncover the areas of interior motivation where the problem is generated, and hence expose the motivational setting toward which any cure will need to be directed." Lowry argues that this stage is the longest of his homiletical plot. In stage three, the clue to resolution is disclosed—an explanatory *why*. This clue is like a missing puzzle piece that brings the whole together. In stage four, listeners experience the difference the gospel makes in their lives. Stage five anticipates the consequences of the sermon preached. It is the closure stage. "It anticipates how life can now be lived." Lowry's students refer to the five stages of the homiletical plot as Oops; Ugh; Aha; Whee and Yeah.

⁵⁹ Life-shaping, as Edwards defines it, "...is a homiletical attempt to reshape the story of our listener's lives with the lives of the biblical narratives." Edwards describes six phases of the story-shaping form: (1.) Personal identification with the biblical characters (2.) Awareness that characters in stories can and must make choices (3.) Understanding what the biblical character decided and why they made that choice (4.) Emotional identification with the consequences the biblical character faced (5.) Deciding whether to emulate or avoid choices made by the biblical characters (6.) Altering behavior in accordance with the decision (*Effective First-Person Preaching*, 128-132)

imagination; using suspense in preaching; finding the big idea in narrative; and basic storytelling technique and characteristics. Featured writers include homiletics such as Haddon Robinson, Fred Craddock, Craig Brian Larson, Paul Borden, Kent Edwards and Jeffrey Arthurs. Transcripts of workshops on preaching and storytelling from the audio series *Preaching Today* can also be found on PreachingToday.com. One helpful workshop by Kevin Miller lays out basic storytelling principles including the use of specific detail, dialogue and denouement, or delay. Miller continues the discussion on storytelling with an advanced workshop. His advanced workshop explores five additional principles for effective storytelling.⁶⁰

Survey of Literature Pertaining Specifically to Story Sermons

Although scores of books on narrative preaching exist, story sermons are not widely discussed among homiletics. Some preachers, however, have wisely recognized the effectiveness of story sermons. Elizabeth Achtemeier refers to story sermons as an experimental sermon form. She argues that one of the most effective sermons ever preached was a story sermon: Nathan to David in II Samuel 12:1-7.⁶¹

In his popular textbook *Preaching*, Fred Craddock describes the nuts and bolts of the homiletical task and spends time discussing the prominent role that story plays in a sermon. In fact, argues Craddock, a story can be the sermon: “Nathan did not preach a sermon to David about taking something from another and then illustrate it with the story of a rich man taking a poor man’s sheep. The story was his sermon. Jesus did not discuss the relation of forgiveness to righteousness and then illustrate

⁶⁰ Kevin Miller, *Preaching Today*, “Renouncing Bitterness; Bonus Workshop with Kevin Miller: Advanced Storytelling.” Issue 249, Track 13.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words*, 84.

his point with the parable of the loving father who had two sons. That parable was his sermon, that parable was his statement on righteousness and forgiveness.”⁶²

Craddock argues that stories in sermons don’t always have to be pushed aside to the support material of the sermon; they can be the sermon. “Is it ethical to create stories for a sermon? Yes; the parables of Jesus are created stories.”⁶³

In his book, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching*, Kent Edwards briefly explores parabolic preaching. “As Jesus did with his parables, you can create a fictitious story to communicate a genuine theological idea.”⁶⁴ Edwards gives a sample of a parabolic sermon. He also urges the preacher of parabolic sermons to keep the following in mind:⁶⁵

1. Make clear to your listeners before you begin whether your story is true to history or true to life.
2. Make sure that your story has the same big idea that the biblical text does.
3. Take some time to show and explain to your listeners the biblical story that your parable is based on.

Survey of Literature Concerning Modern-day Storytelling (screenwriting) as it Pertains to Story Sermons

Modern-day storytelling is best understood by examining two areas: the use of story in Hollywood; and the revival of storytelling in the United States.

We will begin in the film capital of the world: Hollywood. Hollywood has a stake in story. Many volumes have been written about screenwriting. This vast body of literature deals with either the elements of a story or the mechanics of a

⁶² Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1985), 204.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁴ Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching*, 137.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 140-141.

screenplay.⁶⁶ The writing that deals with story form, particularly the monomyth, was most helpful in applying story principles to preaching.⁶⁷

Much understanding of story has come from screenwriters who are committed to following a pattern or structure that is, for the most part, inherent in most stories. These screenwriters firmly believe that understanding and incorporating this pattern, known as the monomyth, is essential to writing a good story.

The idea of the *monomyth* is paramount to stories and storytelling. Monomyth is a term used by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (but actually coined by James Joyce in his book, *Finnegan's Wake*). In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell describes the fundamental structure found in many myths around the world. This structure or pattern focuses on the Hero's Journey. Campbell "...found that all storytelling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth and that all stories, from the crudest jokes to the highest flights of literature, can be understood in terms of the Hero's Journey: the 'monomyth'..."⁶⁸ The Hero's Journey takes the protagonist through more than a dozen stages that lead him from his ordinary world into a strange world and then back to the ordinary world again. Campbell organizes these stages into three sections: Separation, Initiation and Return. Campbell refers to these stages as the 'nuclear unit of the monomyth' where "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the

⁶⁶ Douglas Green, "Cinematic Storytelling in Biblical Preaching" (Unpublished Doctor of Ministry thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, MA), 35.

⁶⁷ Robert McKee calls this form the Archplot.

⁶⁸ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Studio City, California: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998), 10.

hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”⁶⁹

Many current screenwriters base their work on Campbell’s monomyth. Three central books dealing with story and influenced by the monomyth have come out of Hollywood in recent years. These books are *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* by Christopher Vogler; *Story: Substance, Structure and Style* by Robert McKee; and *Screenplay* by Syd Field. These three books are designed to help screenwriters create a monomyth in their stories.

In his book *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, story consultant Christopher Vogler articulates Campbell’s influence on Hollywood:

It’s little wonder that Hollywood is beginning to embrace the ideas Campbell presents in his books. For the writer, producer, director, or designer his concepts are a welcome tool kit, stocked with sturdy instruments ideal for the craft of storytelling. With these tools you can construct a story to meet almost any situation, a story that will be dramatic, entertaining, and psychologically true. With this equipment you can diagnose the problems of almost any ailing plotline, and make the corrections to bring it to its peak of performance. (Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*, 9)

Vogler makes Campbell’s monomyth more user-friendly for screenwriters in particular. While working for the Walt Disney Company as a story analyst, Vogler wrote a seven-page memo outlining the Hero’s Journey. He supported the monomyth with examples from classic and current movies.⁷⁰ After numerous workshops and repeated pleas for help from writers, Vogler expanded his seven page memo into his book, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. In his writing, Vogler simplifies Campbell’s Hero’s Journey and applies it to modern-day storytelling.

⁶⁹ Joseph Campbell, *A Hero with A Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 30.

⁷⁰ Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey*, 3.

Robert McKee's influence has broken the bounds of Hollywood as his ideas are now permeating the business world. In June of 2003, the *Harvard Business Review* published an article called "Storytelling That Moves People: A Conversation with Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee." In this article, McKee argues that the best way to persuade people is "...by uniting an idea with an emotion."⁷¹ McKee says that the way to do that is to tell a compelling story.

McKee's massive volume, *Story: Substance, Structure and Style*, is as thought-provoking as it is thorough. He uses numerous examples from classic and current film to illustrate the universal pattern found in story. McKee refers to this universal pattern as classical design, or archplot:

CLASSICAL DESIGN means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change. This collection of timeless principles I call the Archplot...⁷²

Although McKee does not use the term 'monomyth', he argues that the archplot is a universal story design, found in all cultures:

"Classical design is not a Western view of life. For thousands of years, from the Levant to Java to Japan, the storytellers of Asia have framed their works within the Archplot, spinning yarns of high adventure and great passion. As the rise of Asian film has shown, Eastern screenwriters draw on the same principles of classical design used in the West, enriching their tellings with a unique wit and irony. The Archplot is neither ancient nor modern, Western nor Eastern; it is human."⁷³(62)

Syd Field's *The Screenwriter's Workbook* is a classic textbook used in many undergraduate film courses. The exercises at the end of each chapter help the student

⁷¹ Robert McKee, "Storytelling that Moves People: A Conversation with Screenwriting Coach Robert McKee", *Harvard Business Review*, (June, 2003), 5-8.

⁷² Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure and Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (New York, New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1997), 45.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 62.

apply what has been taught in the chapter. The workbook is based on Field's popular *Screenplay*, another standard book used in college-level film classes.

Another popular book used by screenwriters and aspiring writers in general, is written by novelist Stephen King. *On Writing* is part memoir and part instruction. The second section of King's book is dedicated to the writing task. This section will benefit those who desire to write an original narrative for a story sermon. Despite King's propensity for vulgarity, even high school teachers select *On Writing* for required summer reading.

These books are written on the subject of writing a story. Nothing, however, compares to actually reading a story that follows the monomyth, viewing one on television or film or hearing one. You can hear the stories of Lake Wobegone told by Garrison Keillor on the radio variety show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. The American Film Institute's list, "100 Years...100 Movies" provides examples of the greatest stories ever captured on film.⁷⁴ Television shows like *Law & Order* are good examples of the monomyth and numerous classic novels (by Charles Dickens and Jane Austen in particular) converted to television miniseries by PBS and BBC follow the same monomythic pattern. A number of books written by news reporters highlight the stories of average Americans.⁷⁵

Survey of Literature Concerning the American Revival of Modern-day Storytelling as it Pertains to Expository Story Sermons

Screenwriters, however, aren't the only storytellers. Storytelling has experienced revival in recent years with the success of the first National Storytelling

⁷⁴ Douglas Green, "Cinematic Storytelling in Biblical Preaching" (Unpublished Doctor of Ministry thesis at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, MA), 35.

⁷⁵ See Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* and Tim Russert, *Wisdom of Our Fathers*.

Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee in 1973. This revival has affected professional storytelling, the academic study of storytelling and personal storytelling. Author and storyteller Doug Lipman was part of the new interest in storytelling: “Since the first National Storytelling Festival in 1973, enough...venues had sprung up to support a few hundred full-time storytellers in the U.S. Along with the tens of thousands who told part-time for money, as a hobby, or who just came to listen, tellers like me constituted the “storytelling revival.”⁷⁶ The National Storytelling Network (www.storynet.org) and the International Storytelling Center, both based in Jonesborough, Tennessee, serve as resources for storytellers. Both organizations are ‘...dedicated to advancing the art of storytelling.’⁷⁷ The National Storytelling Festival is held annually at the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough. NSN defines storytelling as “...the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener’s imagination.”⁷⁸

The NSN published a guide for beginning storytellers. *A Beginner’s Guide to Storytelling* is not intended to be a comprehensive history of storytelling. Instead, the guide touches on points of interest that the novice storyteller might later explore in greater detail. This book features short chapters by a variety of practicing storytellers and teachers of storytelling on topics such as: choosing a story, developing a story, delivering a story. A helpful bibliography is included containing important websites, books and articles on the subject of storytelling.

⁷⁶ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basic Books, 2006), xiii.

⁷⁷ The National Storytelling Network, “Definition of Storytelling,” <http://www.storynet.org> (accessed March 1, 2007).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

For as long as people could communicate, stories have been told. In his book *Experiential Storytelling*, Mark Miller says that “Storytelling has been around since the beginning of human history.”⁷⁹ Over the last three decades, a keen interest in storytelling has swept across the United States. This kind of storytelling focuses on personal stories, told not by professionals, but by anyone and everyone; about anything and everything. The basic tenet of this movement is that everyone has a story to tell. National Public Radio’s National Story Project was one of NPR’s most popular features. Host Paul Auster “...invited listeners to submit brief, true-life anecdotes about events that touched their lives.”⁸⁰ More than 4,000 stories were submitted, a testament to the power of personal storytelling. Auster selected the top works and made them available in a book entitled, *I Thought My Father Was God*. The book is also available in a CD collection. The story subjects cover a wide variety of material.

On May 19, 2005, NPR embarked on a new mission: StoryCorps. “StoryCorps is a nationwide project to instruct and inspire Americans to record one another's stories in sound. The project is a collaboration between Sound Portraits Productions, the Library of Congress, and public radio stations nationwide.”⁸¹ The stories of everyday Americans are recorded at a MobileBooth located in towns and cities throughout the country. “Interviews recorded at StoryBooths are added to the StoryCorps Archive, housed at the American Folklife Center at the Library of

⁷⁹ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 31.

⁸⁰ Paul Auster, editor and reader, “I Thought My Father Was God” (HarperAudio, 2001).

⁸¹ Storycorps, <http://storycorps.net> (accessed March 2, 2007.)

Congress.”⁸² The hope is that the StoryCorps Archive will become an oral history of America.

Acclaimed storyteller Donald Davis wrote a small but helpful book called, *Telling Your Own Stories*. Davis writes for the beginner storyteller. He discusses basic storytelling technique such as plot, setting, conflict, and the use of description. Davis focuses on family storytelling. He believes that all stories are about memorable people, places or happenings⁸³. Davis uses helpful prompts, or questions, to get the novice storyteller thinking about the people, places and happenings that might spark a family story. Donald Davis also has numerous audio examples of his storytelling.

Margaret Read MacDonald wrote *The Storyteller's Start-Up Book: Finding, Learning, Performing and Using Folktales*. MacDonald also writes for the beginner storyteller. She includes techniques for learning and performing stories; suggestions for designing a story event; criteria for the selection of story material; and ideas for incorporating storytelling in the classroom. MacDonald also includes twelve tellable tales at the end of her book and a helpful bibliography at the end of every chapter.

Ruth Sawyer's book, *The Way of the Storyteller* is a storytelling classic. First published in 1942, Sawyer describes her storytelling journey and casts her vision for storytelling.

Anne Pellowski wrote a scholarly treatment of storytelling called, *The World of Storytelling*. This comprehensive volume is used by teachers, students, librarians, social scientists and storytellers. Pellowski sketches a multicultural history of storytelling. She describes various types of storytelling: bardic, religious, folk and

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Donald Davis, Telling Your Own Stories: For Family and Classroom Storytelling, Public Speaking, and Personal Journaling (Little Rock, Arkansas: August House, 1993), 7.

community, library and institutional, theatrical, therapeutic and much more. She defines storytelling as a "...moment when oral narration of stories in verse and/or prose, is performed or led by one person before a live audience; the narration may be spoken, chanted, or sung, with or without musical, pictorial, and/or other accompaniment, and may be learned from oral, printed or mechanically recorded sources; one of its purposes must be that of entertainment or delight and it must have at least a small element of spontaneity in the performance."⁸⁴

Although Annette Simmons writes from a business background, her book *The Story Factor*, is filled with wisdom and insight.⁸⁵ She describes six types of stories for use in the corporate world.

Tommy Oaks is a professional storyteller and ordained minister. Obtaining the first graduate degree in storytelling in the United States, Oaks is a wonderful example of someone who uses story to teach the Bible. His tapes and CD's are available at his website, oaksengine.org.

Popular Christian speaker and devotional writer Jan Carlberg practices her craft in audiences throughout the United States. Often speaking with a Norwegian accent, Carlberg tells wonderful stories that teach the lessons of the Bible. She and her mother, Margaret Jensen produced the CD, *Christmas Stories to Warm the Heart*.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Anne Pellowski, *The World of Storytelling: A Practical Guide to the Origins, Development, and Applications of Storytelling* (Bronx, New York: H.W. Wilson Company), 18.

⁸⁵ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basic Books, 2006).

⁸⁶ Jan Carlberg, "Christmas Stories to Warm the Heart", CD produced by Jan Carlberg, 2001.

CHAPTER III

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR EXPOSITORY STORY SERMONS

Storytelling can save your life. At least that was the case in *1001 Arabian Nights*, an ancient Persian tale. Sheherezade, a young virgin, married a vicious king. Because of a betrayal by his first wife, the king lashed out at all women. He married a new bride every day and ordered the execution of his bride on the following day. But Sheherezade was a wise woman. She approached the king's bed chamber with a story. The king was so captivated by the story that he postponed her death to hear another story the next night. Every night a new story secured her life for one more day. Her death was postponed for 1001 nights until the king was persuaded and changed by Sheherezade's stories. A new relationship was formed and the king made Sheherezade his queen. She gained his attention and then his allegiance. In her case, storytelling was a matter of life and death.

Sheherezade knew that storytelling captured interest. Holding the attention of churchgoers on a Sunday morning is no easy task. In the first place, listeners are not sitting at the edge of their pews waiting for the preacher to dictate undeniable, authoritative, objective truths. "No longer can the preacher presuppose the general recognition of her authority as clergy, or the authority of her institution, or the authority of scripture."⁸⁷ In the second place, listeners are captivated all week long by communication that is quick, interactive and visual. When they come to church on a Sunday morning, an ancient and foreign form of communication greets them from the pulpit. Even if the church facility and worship style are contemporary, the message tastes like yesterday's flavor.

⁸⁷ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 14.

Sheherezade knew that captivating her audience was a matter of life and death. That's true for preachers too. We deal with life and death issues. We must effectively communicate that gospel in a way that ears tune in and real hearing occurs.

Sometimes a story is the best means to secure the attention of an audience and compel them to return for more. The ultimate goal after gaining attention is to win allegiance to Jesus Christ. If preaching a story sermon will open a heart and mind to issues of eternity, then a wise preacher will consider spinning a yarn once in a while. Perhaps telling a story every so often will win the heart of an unreceptive listener and begin a new relationship in Jesus Christ. *1001 Arabian Nights* is only a tale, but it teaches us the power of story. Story can influence the most antagonistic listener. Fred Craddock says, "Some believe that telling stories to change the world is like trying to break up concrete by throwing light bulbs⁸⁸ against it. I've been present when someone threw light bulbs against concrete walls, and the walls cracked and fell."

Some might argue that stories don't fall under the umbrella of exposition. Some might fear that a story sermon is more like entertainment than preaching, like homiletical tap-dancing at the ballet. Stories, however, do have a place in expository preaching.

From the creation perspective, all stories that help us to serve God and humankind, to take care of and celebrate creation, are worthy of our time and energy....We are not called to worship stories or to give them up, but to use

⁸⁸ Fred Craddock, "Preaching as Storytelling: How to Rely on Stories to Carry Spiritual Freight" in *PreachingToday.com*, (2007), 2.

them for the furtherance of the kingdom and to the glory of God....Among human gifts and talents, storytelling is clearly an important one.⁸⁹

Screenwriting coach Robert McKee understands that story is the most powerful vehicle to communicate ideas. Ideas are important to preachers. Expository preachers endeavor to preach the ideas of Scripture, or the idea of a particular biblical passage. Properly handling the ideas of God's Word is an enormous exegetical task. Communicating those ideas in a way that touches lives today is even more difficult. That's why story sermons are an important sermon form to consider preaching. A story sermon involves telling a story found outside of Scripture that accurately relays the idea of the biblical passage and its' relevance to the listener. A story is a series of events having a beginning, middle and end.⁹⁰ McKee describes storytelling as "...the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action."⁹¹

The Power of Ideas

Ideas surround us. Most often, we are unaware of them. Television advertising bombards us with ideas: Drinking a certain type of beer puts you in the company of gorgeous women. Wearing a specific type of perfume makes men obsess over you. Driving an expensive car makes you important. Eating fast-food makes your family happy. Advertising sells an idea more than it sells a product.

⁸⁹ Quentin J. Schultze, Redeeming Television, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 39.

⁹⁰ Regarding the three components of story, Thomas Long says: "It is important...that we recognize the logical relationships among those three parts. The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning by resolving its situation of need. The end allows the reader to say, "Yes, this is 'the end.'" Either by showing how the need described in the beginning has been met..." Preaching & the Literary Forms of the Bible, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 71-72.

⁹¹ Robert McKee, Story: Substance, Structure and Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting, 113.

Ideas are everywhere and can be used to great effect. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is a biblical idea of great proportions. Parents, teachers and peers forge ideas into the minds of young people often having lasting consequences: “You can achieve anything” or “You’ll never amount to anything.” Ideologies govern business, politics, religion, academics, whole groups of people and individuals. They have been the impetus behind rising regimes and the force behind toppled tyrants. In his book, *A Mind for God*, James Emery White talks of the power of ideas:

In his provocatively titled book *From Darwin to Hitler*, historian Richard Weikart examines the revolutionary impact Darwinism had on the ethics and morality of social thinkers in Nazi Germany. Believing that Darwinism had overturned any sense of the sanctity of human life, an evolutionary “fitness” (especially in terms of intelligence and health) became the highest arbiter of morality for the Nazis. Weikart concludes that Darwinism played a strategic role not only in the rise of eugenics but also in the rise of euthanasia, infanticide, abortion and racial extermination—all ultimately embraced by the Nazis. The contention that Hitler built his views on Darwinian principles raises one of the most important truths a mind can comprehend: *Ideas have consequences.*⁹²

The Central Idea⁹³

Expository preachers aim to harness *biblical* ideas and preach them to their listeners. The most effective sermons include only one major idea. In his book, *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians*, Duane Litfin emphasizes use of the central idea by tracing its history:

From the ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians to the latest communication theorists, from the preaching in the bible to the sermons heard in pulpits today, from the political oratory of democracies long past to the persuasive messages of our own times, the history of public speaking and the lessons we have learned from that history unite to argue forcefully that a speech, *to be maximally effective, ought to attempt to develop more or less fully only one*

⁹² James Emery White, *A Mind for God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2006), 25.

⁹³ The ‘central idea’ is also called: proposition, theme, main point, thesis statement, big idea, etc

*major proposition.*⁹⁴

The central idea is a well-known concept in propositional/traditional homiletics.

According to traditional homiletics, the clear and concise summarization of the main point of a biblical passage or truth is what makes a sermon effective. The central idea helps to keep the preacher focused and it helps the congregation to grasp the preacher's meaning.⁹⁵ Many homileticians have agreed that a central idea is of

utmost importance during the preaching of a sermon. Donald G. Miller argues:

...any single sermon should have just one major idea. The points of subdivisions should be parts of this one grand thought. Just as bites of any particular food are all parts of the whole, cut into sizes that are both palatable and digestible, so the points of a sermon should be smaller sections of the one theme, broken into tinier fragments so that the mind may grasp them and the life assimilate them.⁹⁶

In his book, *Design for Preaching*, H. Grady Davis says "A well-prepared sermon is the embodiment, the development, the full statement of a significant thought. Every thought is an idea."⁹⁷ Haddon Robinson argues that a sermon should be a bullet and not buckshot.⁹⁸

The importance of a central idea is also recognized in Hollywood. Robert McKee encourages screenwriters to formulate a controlling idea: "one clear, coherent sentence that expresses a story's irreducible meaning."⁹⁹ McKee warns that "...the more ideas you try to pack into a story, the more they implode upon themselves, until the film collapses into a rubble of tangential notions, saying nothing."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), 80.

⁹⁵ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 18.

⁹⁶ Donald Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching*, pp. 53, 55 cited in Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 34.

⁹⁷ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1958), 20.

⁹⁸ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 35.

⁹⁹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ Robert McKee, *Story*, 115.

Ideas are powerful. A single idea is more powerful. A biblical idea is eternally powerful.

Expository Preaching and Biblical ideas

Expositors preach biblical ideas. They preach the ideas of Scripture in a way that is meaningful and relevant to a modern audience. One's view of Scripture determines one's attitude toward the idea of a biblical passage. At the heart of expository preaching is the belief that the Bible is the very word of God. As such, expository preachers want to get the ideas of Scripture right. Expositors are committed to bending their thought to Scripture as opposed to bending Scripture to their thought.¹⁰¹ Understanding the mechanics of an idea is more than a lesson in grammar and syntax. It is unpacking the very thought of God written to His people.

Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching as:

The communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.¹⁰²

Expository preaching is defined by its content and its relevant communication to an audience. An expository sermon is an accurate reflection of biblical thought.

Harold Freeman describes biblical preaching as a sermon that "...confronts the hearers with an accurate interpretation of the biblical revelation and its present meaning for their lives."¹⁰³ *Expository Preaching & Sermon Form*

¹⁰¹ Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 22.

¹⁰² Ibid., 20.

¹⁰³ Harold Freeman, Variety in Biblical Preaching: Innovative Techniques and Fresh Forms (Waco, Texas: Work Book Publishers, 1987), 26.

Many expositors might be uncomfortable calling a story sermon exposition. The mark of biblical preaching, however, is found in its content, not its form. Jeff Arthurs believes that "...a sermon's *content* should explain and apply the Word of God as it is found in a biblical text, and a sermon's *form* should unleash the impact of that text."¹⁰⁴ Story sermons are non-traditional in form, yet are still biblical when their content is faithful to scripture. Story sermons should not be excluded from the category of exposition because of their structure. Expository preaching does not employ only one sermonic form. 'One form fits all' does not describe biblical preaching. H. Grady Davis says, "The sermon idea is thought having form, not thought contained within a form that might just as well contain some other thought. The form is the shape of the thought itself..."¹⁰⁵

Ideas are Shaped Deductively or Inductively

Content must be packaged and delivered to the congregation. The preacher decides how to shape thought. Fred Craddock says, "Anyone who would preach effectively will have as a primary methodological concern the matter of movement. Does the sermon move and in what direction?"¹⁰⁶ Sometimes, a sermon will be shaped deductively. Other times, inductive movement works best. "There are basically two directions in which thought moves: deductive and inductive. Simply stated, deductive movement is from the general truth to the particular application or experience, while induction is the reverse."¹⁰⁷ A deductive sermon states the idea at the start of the sermon. An inductive sermon builds to the idea which is stated near

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 20.

¹⁰⁶ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

the conclusion. In their book *Inductive Preaching*, Ralph Lewis and Gregg Lewis argue that induction should still lead the congregation to the preacher's conclusion. The preacher ought to make every effort to ensure that "...the people get where we want them to be, that they reach our corporate concept, that they believe and accept that conclusion and are ready then for us to go on to declare, elaborate on, reaffirm and apply that message deductively"¹⁰⁸

Preachers of the Bible understood the movement of thought. When the Apostle Peter addressed the crowd at Pentecost in Acts, chapter 2, he preached an inductive sermon. Peter chose induction as the best way to communicate his idea. Dealing with a potentially hostile Jewish crowd, Peter would immediately lose attention if he began his sermon like this: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."¹⁰⁹ Peter knew the crowd needed time to get to that conclusion.

Peter also employed deduction in his speaking. When speaking at Cornelius' house to a large gathering of Gentile God-fearers, Peter began by saying: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."¹¹⁰ The circumstances that brought Peter to Cornelius' home were extraordinary. The crowd of Gentile God-fearers was anxiously waiting to hear a word from Peter. They were attentive and ready to listen. Peter did not make them wait. He gave them his idea immediately.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph Loren Lewis and Gregg A. Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, Good News Publishers, 1983), 136.

¹⁰⁹ Acts 2:36

¹¹⁰ Acts 10:34-35.

The Apostle Paul varied his sermon structure. When preaching at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Paul preached an inductive sermon. Paul took his listeners on a journey of God's provision for His people, starting at the exodus. Halfway through his sermon he introduced Jesus as God's ultimate provision. Paul concluded with his idea: "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."¹¹¹

When Paul and Silas were in prison and the doors miraculously flew open, they preached a deductive sermon, stating the idea up front: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..."¹¹² The circumstances required a deductive form. The jailer was in dire straits after the prison he was guarding violently shook, freeing the prisoners. He was about to take his own life when Paul intervened. Trembling on the ground, he asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas needed to get directly to the point and waste no time.

Peter and Paul shaped their sermons according to the needs of their listeners. Contemporary preachers should do the same. "Homiletics has often ignored the audience...as if one message could and should fit all hearers in all conditions and all situations."¹¹³

Expository preaching is defined by content, not form. Again, Davis argues,

"...there is a right form for each sermon, namely, the form that is right for this particular sermon. A right form can never be imposed on any sermon. If it has to be imposed it is not right. The right form derives from the substance of

¹¹¹ Acts 13:13-41

¹¹² Acts 16:31

¹¹³ Ralph and Gregg Lewis, Inductive Preaching, 25.

the message itself, is inseparable from the content, becomes one with the content, and gives a feeling of finality to the sermon.”¹¹⁴

Many Sermon Shapes

Deduction and induction are general categories of movement. Sermons, however, come in all shapes and sizes. The best form is the one that conveys the idea of the passage and its relevance to the audience. There are a variety of sermon forms within the parameters of biblical preaching. Arthurs argues, “If the use of testimony, music, or parable helps us fulfill our calling to stand between two worlds, we’re free to use such forms. If the use of question and answer, story, or object lesson techniques help us glorify God and minister to the listeners, we should feel free to preach with a variety of forms, just as Jesus and other biblical preachers did.”¹¹⁵

Torrey Robinson points out the diversity of homiletical form in the Bible:

Jeremiah bought a clay jar from a potter and then smashed it in one of Jerusalem’s crowded gates to announce God’s judgment on the people of Judah and Jerusalem. Perhaps Ezekiel’s most memorable sermon on judgment involved drawing on a clay tablet and then lying on his left side for 390 days. Ezekiel followed that message with one, preached to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, in which he used a sword to get a shave and a haircut and made his shorn hair an object lesson of God’s judgment. In another prophecy, Ezekiel acted out God’s message concerning being taken as captives into exile. In obedience to God, Hosea tangibly communicated God’s patience and love for unfaithful Israel through the prophet’s marriage to an adulteress.¹¹⁶

Haddon Robinson advocates asking two questions to test a sermon form: “(1) Does this development communicate what the passage teaches? (2) Will it accomplish my purpose with this audience? If your development communicates your message, by all

¹¹⁴ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 9.

¹¹⁵ Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 16.

¹¹⁶ Torrey Robinson, “First-Person Expository Sermons,” (Unpublished Doctor of Ministry thesis at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), 9.

means use it; if it gets in the way of your message, then devise a form more in keeping with the idea and purpose of the Scriptures and the needs of your hearers.”¹¹⁷ Since exposition is concerned with content and not form, a story sermon can indeed be expository.

Stories tell Truth

Choosing the best form for your sermon means taking the idea of the passage seriously and the relevant communication of that idea seriously. Story sermons are a valid sermon form to consider preaching because they effectively portray the idea of Scripture while meeting the needs of the contemporary listener. Some expositors, however, deem them unsophisticated for preaching. Stories are considered fluffy entertainment and not proper for the pulpit. Story is associated with make-believe and child’s play.

But stories revolve around ideas. Ideas are central to narrative. Christians learn theology through the stories of the Bible. Stories may not be propositional, but they do teach ideas. They teach us theological truths: “Evangelical and fundamental Christians find normative and objective truth in the narrative portions of Scripture, as in all the genres of inspired Holy Writ. The primary and absorbing concern of the preacher of narrative (as in all of the Bible) is to discover the meaning of the passage.”¹¹⁸

The Bible speaks of occasions when preachers told stories to express biblical truths. The prophet Nathan told a story to David to communicate the idea that sin must be punished. Jesus often preached story sermons, packaging His ideas in

¹¹⁷ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 131.

¹¹⁸ David Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story*, 74.

narrative. His stories taught eternal, life-changing truths. Some have called Jesus the Master Storyteller:

He wouldn't preach without a story, and most of those were *parables*. The New Testament records thirty-three to seventy-seven parables of Jesus, depending on your definition. He doesn't use them merely as teasers, light introductions to get his hearers listening for what he really wants to say. They are often the primary expression of his message. Jesus' little stories are tied to very big ideas. The story of the good Samaritan forms a sermon on compassion. The prodigal son teaches forgiveness. The parable of the talents instructs us about personal responsibility. When Jesus preached, *narrative* carried much of the weight of his message.¹¹⁹

Stories provide entertainment and pleasure, but the ultimate aim of a story is

to demonstrate truth. "It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who provided the classic definition of art: the immediate object is pleasure, and the ultimate object is truth."¹²⁰

Stories give pleasure, but good stories give truth. Salmon argues that "... good stories do not merely entertain. Like all genuine art, good stories convey truth."¹²¹

Through a story sermon, the preacher endeavors to preach God's truth in a way that connects to the audience. Story is a legitimate sermonic form.

Stories and the Bible

Stories are no stranger to the Bible. A large part of the Bible is comprised of stories. "Narratives are the dominant genre in the Bible."¹²² Thomas Long argues: "There are battle stories, betrayal stories, stories about seduction and treachery in the royal court, stories about farmers and fools, healing stories, violent stories, funny stories and sad ones, stories of death, and stories of resurrection."¹²³ Stories are so

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *Inductive Preaching*, 69.

¹²⁰ Bruce Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching*, 37.

¹²¹ Bruce Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching*, 38.

¹²² Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 15.

¹²³ Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 66.

common in the Bible that many people have claimed the Bible is exclusively a book of narratives. Of course, the Bible has much non-narrative material. The understanding, however, that the Bible is a storybook makes complete sense considering the narrative understructure of the Bible as a whole. Even the non-narrative Biblical material complements the ‘master’ story of Scripture.¹²⁴ Bruce Salmon suggests, “Within the Bible...it is story which is prominent. A narrative thread runs throughout, an underlying plot giving thematic unity to the whole.”¹²⁵

The Bible is chock-full of individual stories found within the grand story of Scripture. Story sermons should be taken seriously because God used story to communicate His truth to people.

Stories and Culture

Story sermons should also be given a second glance because of the way in which our culture communicates. Part of the definition of expository preaching deals with relevant application. Relevant application is central to biblical preaching. Relevancy starts with knowing one’s audience. Jesus understood his culture and was aware of the needs of His audience. Story resonated with His hearers. When telling stories, Jesus “...was not engaging in a unique method of teaching. He was in fact simply following the common practices of his culture, which was a story culture.”¹²⁶

We also live in a story culture, or a secondarily oral culture as Walter Ong suggests. Using story to communicate God’s truth makes sense in our culture.

Robert McKee says that “The art of story is the dominant cultural force in the

¹²⁴ Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 66.

¹²⁵ Bruce Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching: A Guide to the Theory and Practice* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Publishing, 1988), 25.

¹²⁶ William Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, 18.

world...”¹²⁷ Pointing to the time Americans spend under the influence of narrative, Kent Edwards argues that story has left its mark: “It has changed the way people prefer to communicate. Today’s gentlemen (and ladies) prefer stories—even when they go to church. Wise preachers recognize the preference of their parishioners and capitalize on it in their preaching.”¹²⁸ Preaching with variety, Jeff Arthurs argues, is one way to build a bridge to twenty-first century listeners. Arthurs indicates five factors that influence how contemporary listeners listen:

- 1.) Contemporary audiences are visual, so the verbal should be augmented with a ‘strong visual component.’¹²⁹
- 2.) Contemporary audiences suffer from ‘information overload’ due to the rate of speed at which we communicate.
- 3.) Contemporary listeners crave experiential knowledge.
- 4.) Contemporary listeners “...locate authority in personal experience”.¹³⁰
- 5.) Contemporary listeners learn and think in a variety of ways.

These factors should influence how expositors preach. As Arthurs suggests, one way to meet the needs of contemporary listeners is to preach with variety. Story sermons offer the variety that will appeal to a modern congregation and their listening habits. “The best way to communicate to a story-loving society is with stories.”¹³¹ Jesus was in tune with his culture, and as expository preachers, we should be in tune with ours. As Robert McKee suggests, “Storytelling is the most powerful way to put

¹²⁷ Robert McKee, *Story*, 15.

¹²⁸ Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 14.

¹²⁹ Jeff Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 33.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³¹ Kent Edwards, *Effective First Person Preaching*, 15.

ideas into the world today.” Biblical ideas that connect to people and make a difference in their lives are the essence of exposition. Story sermons are a relevant and meaningful way to put biblical ideas into the world today.

Indirection and Stories

So far we have seen that even though stories entertain and provide pleasure, ideas are still essential to story; God used story to communicate ideas to people; our culture is a story culture. Still, many preachers might feel uneasy about preaching a story on a Sunday morning. Why is that? Perhaps it has to do with the nature of story. Stories rely on indirection to make points. We have talked about the importance of ideas. The preaching of a single, biblical idea defines exposition. Stories, however, often employ indirection. They are stated implicitly or indirectly. If biblical ideas are so important to expository preachers, why not state them propositionally? Propositional preaching is clear and leaves no or little room for interpretation. But story uses indirection to tell its truth.

Literature enacts rather than states, shows rather than tells. Instead of giving abstract propositions about virtue or vice, for example, literature presents stories of good or evil characters in action. The commandment “you shall not murder” is propositional and direct, while the story of Cain and Abel embodies the same truth in the distinctly literary form of narrative—a narrative, we should note, that does not even use the word *murder*.¹³²

Some argue that the implicit idea of a story penetrates more deeply than the idea of a proposition stated explicitly. Propositional points and sub-points are often seen as pointed fingers and listeners tune out. “Some of us are wary of the preacher’s

¹³² Ryken, Leland and Tremper Longmann, A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) 17.

role as the community's primary authority figure, answer-person, or authoritative interpreter of Scripture and life."¹³³

A story shows the truth instead of tells the truth. Perhaps a better word for storytelling is story-showing. Story reveals its truth, or idea, indirectly, without explanation. As the following traditional tale demonstrates, story is an idea, a truth, cloaked in a garment of words and characters:

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers' doors and was readily welcomed into the people's houses. They invited her to eat at their tables and warm herself by their fire.¹³⁴

Indirection is well documented outside the realm of homiletics. Annette Simmons, a corporate trainer, advocates the use of story in corporate America where the naked truth is often met with resistance. "Story is less direct, more gracious, and prompts less resistance."¹³⁵ Working with executives stuck in an impasse, Annette Simmons tells the following story about her greyhound, Larry:

Larry has never learned that when he walks on one side of a telephone pole and I walk on the other—all forward movement stops. Larry just looks up at me with his little dog face wondering why we aren't going anywhere. I could tell him all day long to back up, but he won't back up until I back up. Once I back up, he follows. Only then can we disentangle ourselves and move on.¹³⁶

Simmons' meaning is clear to the executives even though she does not state it explicitly. "The truth is right out there, and yet, because the truth is clothed in a story, they let it in. They don't slam the door in my face, they listen and more often

¹³³ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 22.

¹³⁴ Traditional Jewish Tale, cited in Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*, (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2006), 27.

¹³⁵ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 28.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

than not, they back off their positions, disentangle themselves from their impasse, and move on.”¹³⁷

Simmons argues that propositions actually lend themselves to interpretation more than story: “If you let the “facts speak for themselves,” you risk an interpretation that does not fit your intentions.”¹³⁸ This thinking is based on research that suggests people interpret rational facts with their emotions.¹³⁹

Indirection is evident in Hollywood. Screenwriter Robert McKee says, “Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story’s event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea...without explanation.”¹⁴⁰ In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson cites an example from a *Time* interview of film director Stanley Kubrick: “The essence of dramatic form is to let an idea come over people without its being plainly stated. When you say something directly, it is simply not as potent as it is when you allow people to discover it for themselves.”¹⁴¹ Robert McKee agrees:

“Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing—they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested, and certainly never convinced, when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas....Explanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film’s quality. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage.”¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Ibid., 28-29.

¹³⁸ Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 52.

¹³⁹ See Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor*, 55.

¹⁴⁰ Robert McKee, *Story*, 113.

¹⁴¹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 125.

¹⁴² Robert McKee, *Story*, 114.

McKee maintains that regardless of genre, the principle is universal: "...the story's meaning, whether comic or tragic, must be dramatized in an emotionally expressive Story Climax without the aid of explanatory dialogue."¹⁴³

Indirection is evident in novels. Novelist Flannery O'Connor says that the storyteller speaks "*with* character and action, not *about* character and action"¹⁴⁴.

Narratives do not directly state ideas. "Literary texts do not come right out and state their themes. They embody them."¹⁴⁵

Indirection and Homiletics

Indirection is used in business and in Hollywood. It has also found its way into homiletics. Fred Craddock advocates indirection, or what he calls, 'overhearing'. His book, *Overhearing the Gospel*, is based on the statement made by Soren Kierkegaard: "There is no lack of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something which the one man cannot directly communicate to the other." Kierkegaard tapped into the power of indirection when he overheard a conversation at a cemetery between a grandfather and grandson. The old man and the young boy stood at the headstone of one whom they both loved: the boys' father, also the grandfather's son. Kierkegaard was moved as he overheard the grandfather speaking tenderly about issues of life, death and life after death. Kierkegaard:

"Regarded the direct as the mode for transferring information and totally appropriate for the fields of history, science, and related disciplines. The indirect is the mode for eliciting capability and action from within the listener, a transaction that does not occur by giving the hearer some information."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Ibid., 114.

¹⁴⁴ Ryken, A Literary Guide, 76.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴⁶ Fred Craddock, Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Persons Who Have Heard it All Before, 82.

Kierkegaard believed that indirection had the power to change behavior.

Direct address, on the other hand, informs the mind but doesn't necessarily lead to action. Craddock says,

Teaching and preaching that stay in the conceptual world of ideas and doctrines, however true or right or current, leave hearers essentially unmoved. The consciousness in its imaginative depths is unaltered. It is quite often the case that a listener or reader will agree rationally with a position presented with no evidence of modified behavior. The head says yes, but the images of the way life is, or people are, or I am, still hang as they are in the heart's gallery.¹⁴⁷

Indirection in the Bible

Jesus often relied on indirection in his preaching.

When asked by his disciples why he spoke in parables, Jesus outlined a theory of communication (Matt. 13:10-17) based on the literary principle of indirection: he concealed the truth from immediate perception in order to reveal it to listeners who were willing to ponder his parables. Instances from the life of Jesus such as these suggest a literary approach to truth that frequently avoids direct propositional statement and embodies truth in distinctly literary forms.¹⁴⁸

When an expert in the law asked the question 'who is my neighbor?', Jesus responded with a story about a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan. Jesus never came right out and stated who acted as a neighbor to the man who had been beaten and robbed. Instead, Jesus asked the expert in the law to figure it out. The answer was crystal clear even though it wasn't stated propositionally.

Of course, not every story deals with indirection. Many folktales state morals at the conclusion of the story. Aesop's Fables state propositions. *The Leopard and*

¹⁴⁷ Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 133-134.

¹⁴⁸ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 9.

the Fox teach us that beauty is only skin-deep. *The Wolf and the Lamb* teach that “The tyrant will always find an excuse when he would injure the innocent.”¹⁴⁹

There are numerous examples in the Bible where a proposition is explicitly stated after a story. When Jesus told the *Parable of the Sower* he clearly explained it to his disciples. Different audiences call for different approaches to story.

Biblical ideas are the foundation of expository preaching. This thesis advocates the use of story sermons as an effective means to preach the ideas, or truths of Scripture in today’s world. Sometimes the idea of the story sermon will be stated explicitly in the form of a proposition. More often, the idea of the story sermon will be stated implicitly, relying on the power of indirection. Robinson says, “Whether the points are stated or only implied depends on the skill of the preacher, the purpose of the sermon, and the awareness of the audience.”¹⁵⁰ Certainly there is a place for indirection in preaching. Implied ideas can actually be more potent than stated ideas. “Narratives are most effective when the audience hears the story and arrives at the speaker’s ideas without the ideas being stated directly.”¹⁵¹

The Problem—Experience vs. Proposition

The implicit nature of story is a strength as well as a weakness. The danger is that the listener will arrive at a different idea than the speaker intended. “...literature conveys its meanings by a certain indirectness and therefore calls for interpretation.”¹⁵² Another danger is that the listener will grasp many ideas, but no

¹⁴⁹ Lois Hill, ed., *Aesop’s Fables*, (Longmeadow Press, Stamford CT, 1988), 8-10.

¹⁵⁰ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 125.

¹⁵¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 130.

¹⁵² Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 76.

single, clear idea. Either way, the intent of the biblical author and preacher are not captured by the listener.

Story is prone to another weakness. When ideas are not stated directly, the experience of the story might trump the idea of the story. “A propositional statement of themes can never be a substitute or even the appointed goal of experiencing a literary text. At most it is a lens through which we see the incarnated experiences—something that brings the experiences embodied in the text to focus.”¹⁵³

Many preachers who are not expositors actually value experience above proposition. The concept of the central idea is not central to all homiletician’s practice of preaching. Some preachers argue that propositional preaching turns what should be a dialogue into a monologue.¹⁵⁴ The authoritative preacher simply dispenses biblical truths into the hearts and minds of the congregation.¹⁵⁵ The congregation plays no role in such sermons and the conclusion is authoritatively handed down to them as the only available option.¹⁵⁶ The congregation’s own experience is not taken into consideration when the conclusion is stated plainly in the central idea.

In the past, preaching aimed to communicate meaning propositionally. Today, however, a change has occurred whereby the preacher and the audience

¹⁵³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵⁴ In his essay, “Inductive Preaching,” Fred Craddock argues that monologue has no place in a dialogical world. Dialogical preaching gives the congregation the opportunity to go through the same process that the preacher went through in order to arrive at the message to be preached. P. 2.

¹⁵⁵ See Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word*, particularly Rose’s critique and response to traditional homiletics in chapter one.

¹⁵⁶ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid, Oklahoma: Phillips University, 1974), 54.

together create the experience of meaning.¹⁵⁷ This focus on experience, with a disdain for propositions is what defines the New Homiletic.¹⁵⁸ In narrative preaching circles, experience plays a more prominent role than reason.¹⁵⁹ This concept has grave implications for preaching. When experience becomes one's primary goal, then the preacher has strayed from biblical exposition. The goal of preaching becomes the experience or the event itself.

Expositors, however, always place proposition in the position of prominence. Implicitly or explicitly stated, expositors communicate biblical ideas in a way that is relevant to their listeners. The idea is central. Every expositor must be committed to authorial intent and relevancy first. When this commitment is made, the preacher will be careful to shape her story sermon to lead the congregation to the biblical truth. As the biblical truth is subtly dispensed, the listeners also experience the story. And good stories are always experienced. A commitment to expository preaching will ensure that the ideas of story sermons are grasped by hearers even as they are drawn into the story and experience it personally. In today's culture people want to experience and understand the truth themselves. Story is not overly direct and listeners are not force-fed conclusions. Expository story sermons allow listeners to come to conclusions on their own without coming to their own conclusions. Experience is important when listening to a story, but it should always be subordinate to the idea of the passage, the biblical truth.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Long, "And How Shall They Hear? The Listener in Contemporary Preaching," in Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock (ed. G. R. O'Day and T. Long; Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 167-188.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Campbell, Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 120-121.

¹⁵⁹ Robert Reed, Jeffrey Bullock, and David Fleer, "Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 21/2 (1998) 1-9.

We Experience Stories Holistically

People are able to enter into story and experience it because story touches us on two levels: cognitively and emotionally. Story penetrates us in a deeper, more emotional way than proposition. As a form of art, story deals with heart and mind:

The artist convinces us of the truth by dealing with us holistically. Artists try to make us feel the truth. Good art gets the truth inside us on a level deeper than the surface of our minds. On this level, truth is most irresistible. The mind may not only resist the truth but may even accept it and keep it at a personal distance. Logical convictions are not necessarily existential imperatives. The artist makes us nostalgic for the beauty we have missed, the life we have forfeited, the meaning which somehow eluded our grasp. Art haunts us with the spectre of a lost humanity and bids us return to paradise.¹⁶⁰

We Experience Life Narratively

People also relate to story because story is natural to all human beings. We live life narratively, or inductively. Thomas Long argues that "...stories organize time in the same way we organize the passing moments of our lives." Stories move inductively, from the specifics to the general. We live life in the particulars. We sum up the particulars of life and then we draw broad lessons.

Everyone lives inductively, not deductively. No farmer deals with the problem of calthood, only with the calf. The woman in the kitchen is not occupied with the culinary arts in general but with a particular roast or cake. The wood craftsman is hardly able to discuss intelligently the topic of "chairness," but is a master with a chair. We will speak of the sun rising and setting long after everyone knows better. The minister says, "All people are mortal" and meets drowsy agreement; he announces that "Mr. Brown's son is dying," and the church becomes the church."¹⁶¹

People see their lives as a story. We want the events of life to make sense and fit into a meaningful life story: "The storyteller's claim...is that life has meaning.

¹⁶⁰ Anthony Padovano, "Aesthetic Experience and Redemptive Grace," *Aesthetic Dimensions of Religious Education*, ed. Gloria Durka and Joan-marie Smith (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979), 6. cited in Bausch, *Storytelling, Imagination and Faith*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 51.

The power of stories is that they are telling us that life adds up somehow, that life itself is like a story. And this grips us and fascinates us because of the feeling it gives us that if there is meaning in any life—in Hamlet’s, in Mary’s, in Christ’s—then there is meaning also in our lives.”¹⁶²

We even try to make sense of other people’s stories. If someone is perpetually sad or sarcastic or peculiar, we try to piece together the puzzle and figure out their story. What events shaped that person into the man and woman they are now? What is their story? “Even when others do not tell us their stories, we try to guess what those stories may be....We are curious about other people’s stories not only because they are often interesting but also because they have the power to suggest possibilities for our own lives.”¹⁶³

Story’s Attraction: Character Identification

People relate to stories because they touch both heart and mind and because we live life narratively. But what are the mechanics? How does story specifically affect us? How does it work particularly? Stories affect people in primarily two ways: through character identification and as metaphor for life. “Storytellers work at presenting a character in just the way that will enable the reader to say, ‘I’m like that.’”¹⁶⁴ Audiences must identify with a character in the story. “The American playwright Arthur Miller...once observed, “In every successful drama there is something which makes a person say, ‘Hey! That’s me!’” The story becomes a mirror in which self-recognition produces self-understanding.”¹⁶⁵ Thomas Long

¹⁶² Frederick Buechner, cited in Salmon, Storytelling and Preaching, 38.

¹⁶³ Thomas Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 73.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁶⁵ Gary Inrig, The Parables, 7.

argues that stories create an impact when the reader becomes one of the characters.¹⁶⁶

“The great single power in storytelling is the power of identification. And things that have long been in the head, known, begin to move toward the heart, and that’s when life is changed.”¹⁶⁷

Nathan the prophet understood this dynamic of storytelling when he told a story that David was sure to relate to.¹⁶⁸ As a former shepherd, David fought bears and lions with his bare hands to protect his flock.¹⁶⁹ David certainly identified with the shepherd in Nathan’s story whose precious ewe lamb was indiscriminately/unjustifiably taken from him. “In telling David a story, Nathan took the wise approach. Most of us enjoy hearing stories because there’s usually somebody or something in the story that we can identify with.”¹⁷⁰

Jesus’ stories produced the same effect. When Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son, the Bible tells us that tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees were present.¹⁷¹ I imagine the tax collectors and sinners identified with the younger brother. The Pharisees of course, were meant to identify with the older brother. When that story is told to a modern audience, people still identify with either the younger brother or the older brother. Some can relate to the father. Amos Wilder noted:

Perhaps the special character of the stories in the New Testament lies in the fact that they are not told for themselves, that they are not only about other people, but that they are always about us. They locate us in the very midst of the great story and plot of all time and space, and therefore relate us to the

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 74.

¹⁶⁷ Fred Craddock, “Preaching as Storytelling: How to Rely on Stories to Carry Spiritual Freight” in PreachingToday.com (2007), 2.

¹⁶⁸ II Samuel 12:1-4

¹⁶⁹ I Samuel 17:34-37

¹⁷⁰ Warren Wiersbe, Preaching and Teaching with Imagination, 52.

¹⁷¹ Luke 15:1-2

great dramatist and storyteller, God himself...This question of identification arises with every story we read, whether fold-story, epic, or modern novel. We identify with the hero or the villain, in their actions or in their fortunes.¹⁷²

Story makes an impact when listeners identify with a character in the story.

Many of Jesus' stories produce character identification. Some have likened Jesus' stories to mirrors.¹⁷³ Listeners see themselves in the story's characters. They hear the Lord's stories and say, 'I'm like that.' But Jesus' stories often push the listener to see beyond himself. Jesus' stories result in listeners seeing God.

But they [Jesus' stories] are more than mirrors. They almost always become windows into the heart and mind of God Himself. As a result, they do far more than reveal who we are. They help us know who God is. They not only expose our condition, but also point to a divine remedy. Self-recognition without a divine provision would bring only discouragement. The Lord's parables bring encouragement, because in them we meet ourselves and our God.¹⁷⁴

Story sermons can have the same effect. Character identification is essential for connecting with an audience. But ultimately, the listener needs to see himself in light of God. We need to see ourselves, then we need to see God. That's what the gospel does. It shows us our sin and then it shows us the remedy for our sin—Jesus Christ.

Story's Attraction: Metaphor for Life

Story also makes an impact as metaphor for life. McKee says that "...all writers, must come to understand the relationship of story to life..."¹⁷⁵ Stories allow us to take a step back and view life. Stories say 'life is like this.'¹⁷⁶ As we look at life through story, we see a truth. Maybe it's a truth that we've always believed. Or

¹⁷² Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 75.

¹⁷³ Both Warren Wiersbe and Gary Inrig use the picture, mirror, vision metaphor when dealing with Jesus' parables.

¹⁷⁴ Gary Inrig, *The Parables* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 1991), 7.

¹⁷⁵ Robert McKee, *Story*, 25.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

maybe it's one which we must be persuaded to believe—a new way of looking at the world.

Sometimes stories create their impact not by asking us to see ourselves as one of the characters but by setting forth a “slice of life,” by declaring, “This is how the world really is,” and demanding a response from the reader to the question, Is it true or not? We each have stories by which we define our identity and shape our life. Each new story we encounter is placed alongside the old stories for comparison. Sometimes the new story confirms our world view, but on other occasions it challenges that world—and we must choose in which world we will live.¹⁷⁷

Conveying an idea is not enough. The storyteller wants hearers to buy into the idea and believe it. “...an artist must have not only ideas to express, but ideas to prove. Expressing an idea, in the sense of exposing it, is never enough. The audience must not just understand; it must believe. You want the world to leave your story convinced that yours is a truthful metaphor for life.”¹⁷⁸

Many of Jesus' kingdom parables touched listeners as metaphor for life. When Jesus said his kingdom was like a mustard seed¹⁷⁹, he was challenging people's view of his kingdom. His listeners had to decide if they believed the kingdom of God was really as Jesus said it was. When Jesus said his kingdom was like a wedding banquet¹⁸⁰, his listeners must have been shocked by the circumstances surrounding the dinner. Jesus was using a metaphor which said, ‘My kingdom is like this. Do you believe it?’ People had to leave that story and make a decision. Would they continue to think of God's kingdom as they always had, or would they trade their old view for Jesus' view of the kingdom.

Summary

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 76.

¹⁷⁸ Robert McKee, Story, 113.

¹⁷⁹ Luke 13:18-19; Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-32

¹⁸⁰ Matthew 22:1-14

Biblical ideas are essential to expository preachers. In traditional homiletics, ideas are conveyed through proposition. Story, however, communicates biblical ideas through character and action. Story sermons are a legitimate form of preaching because exposition is concerned with biblical ideas, not form.

Much of the Bible is narrative. Jesus often used story to communicate His ideas. An important aspect of exposition deals with relevancy. Our culture responds to story. Story has a remarkable power to put forth ideas in a way that penetrates people to the core. Story works when people identify with a character or when they understand a story as a metaphor for life. Often, the ideas of story are implicit.

In 388 B.C. Plato urged the city fathers of Athens to exile all poets and storytellers. They are a threat to society, he argued. Writers deal with ideas, but not in the open, rational manner of philosophers. Instead, they conceal their ideas inside the seductive emotions of art. Yet felt ideas, as Plato pointed out, are ideas nonetheless. Every effective story sends a charged idea out to us, in effect compelling the idea into us, so that we must believe. In fact, the persuasive power of a story is so great that we may believe its meaning even if we find it morally repellent. Storytellers, Plato insisted, are dangerous people.¹⁸¹

Preachers of story sermons are not a danger to their listeners. They use story with care and caution. They tell stories that will glorify God and bring people closer to Jesus Christ.

Everybody loves a good story. Whether it's written on the printed page—on recycled paper in a bound book, or on newsprint in the Lifestyle section; whether it's heard over radio-waves by a professionally trained voice, or at the break room with lively chatter; whether it's seen on the Big Screen with stadium seating, or the little screen from your recliner—everybody loves a good story. Story touches us in a

¹⁸¹ Robert McKee, Story, 130.

deeper, more emotional way than proposition. Expositors will communicate biblical ideas through story sermons when they are committed to seeking biblical truth and its relevancy for modern audiences.

CHAPTER IV
A MANUAL FOR THE PREPARATION AND DELIVERY OF
EXPOSITORY STORY SERMONS

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TERMS USED IN THE MANUAL

The following terms are important to the study of expository story sermons and will be employed in this manual:

Storytelling: As defined by the National Storytelling Network: “an ancient art form and a valuable form of human expression....Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener’s imagination.” The NSN suggests the following traits of storytelling:

- Storytelling is interactive
- Storytelling uses words
- Storytelling uses actions
- Storytelling presents a story
- Storytelling encourages the active imagination of the listeners

Protagonist: The protagonist is the hero of the story. He or she is on a journey or quest for an object of desire. The listener must identify with the protagonist.

Antagonist: The force that opposes the protagonist.

Fable: A fictitious story that teaches a moral lesson. The characters are typically talking animals like the ones found in Aesop’s fables.

Folk Tale: A traditional story handed down orally among a people. A folktale carries with it the ‘thumbprints of history.’¹⁸²

Parable: C.H. Dodd’s classic definition: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Jane Yolen, editor, Favorite Folktales from Around the World, (Pantheon Books, New York, 1986), 5.

¹⁸³ C.H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, (Scribner’s: New York, 1961), 5.

Story Sermon: a story found outside of Scripture which is based on a biblical text.

CHAPTER ONE

STORY IS A BLESSING

Once upon a time there was a tiny village cursed by a ferocious monster who blocked the only road leading in and out of the village. Many courageous knights set out to fight the monster but no matter which weapon they chose, the monster with his magical powers would match this weapon with more than double the power. The first knight, who brandished a club of wood, was flattened by a club twice its size. A second knight tried to burn the monster with fire and was sizzled to a crisp when the monster blew a fire twice as hot back at him. A third knight wielded a sword of steel. He was sliced in half by the monster's magical sword twice as sharp and twice as long. The fate of these three knights discouraged any further attempts and the people in the village learned to live with their limitations. One day Jack, the village fool, announced that he had a new idea to vanquish the monster. Most people laughed at Jack. Only the curious and the courageous marched out with him, helping him carry food and water to the place where the monster blocked the road. The monster roared, stretched to his full height, and glared at Jack. The onlookers gasped when Jack grabbed an apple and walked right up to the monster. "Are you hungry?" Jack asked. The monster's eyes narrowed to slits and he sniffed the apple. When his massive jaw opened wide one of the ladies fainted dead away before the monster delicately took the apple from Jack's quivering hand. The monster raised his fist high and brought it down in front of the amazed crowd. Bam! Opening his fist they saw two apples, juicier and redder than the one he had eaten. In the same way a clay urn of water was replaced with two golden urns filled with water, sweeter and clearer than the first. The people ran to tell the others in the village of this miracle. When they returned Jack smiled and the monster smiled back with enough warmth to convince even the most cynical of the villagers that this monster was now a blessing to the village rather than a curse.¹⁸⁴

What is an Expository Story Sermon?

The best way to understand expository story sermons is to dissect the parts in order to understand the whole. Therefore, definitions are important.

Expository: As defined by Harold Freeman, an expository sermon is one that "...confronts the hearers with an accurate interpretation of the biblical revelation and its present meaning for their lives."¹⁸⁵ Exposition has to do with the idea of the biblical writer and making it applicable in the world of the listener. Exposition

¹⁸⁴ (Adapted from Ed Stivender's retelling of Aaron Piper's "The Giant Who Was More than a Match") in Annette Simmons, *The Storytelling Factor*, 157-158.

¹⁸⁵ Harold Freeman, *Variety in Biblical Preaching: Innovative Techniques and Fresh Forms* (Waco, Texas: Work Book Publishers, 1987), 26.

requires exegetical skill in deciphering the meaning of the passage and hermeneutical skill in interpreting the passage with relevance for a modern audience.

Story: A story is a series of events having a beginning, middle and end.¹⁸⁶ McKee describes storytelling as “...the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action.”¹⁸⁷

Story Sermon: A story sermon is the telling of a story found outside of Scripture which is based on a biblical text.

Expository Story Sermon: the telling of a story found outside of Scripture that accurately relays the idea of the biblical passage and its’ relevance to the listener.

Why Preach an Expository Story Sermon?

Why bother preaching a story sermon? Why learn a new form of preaching? Stories are told by camp counselors around the fire pit on summer nights, not by the theologically trained on a Sunday morning. As a busy pastor, you don’t have time to learn an alternate form. Learning a different form is only keeping you from practicing the forms you already know and love. You’re already on track, full speed ahead. Picking up a non traditional form is like coming to a dead halt—meeting a roadblock in the middle of your homiletical highway.

Or, maybe you’re interested in trying a story sermon or two, but you feel that the storytelling beast might eat you alive. You don’t know how to approach him.

¹⁸⁶ Regarding the three components of story, Thomas Long says: “It is important...that we recognize the logical relationships among those three parts. The beginning of a story always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through an action of some kind. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning by resolving its situation of need. The end allows the reader to say, “Yes, this is ‘the end.’” Either by showing how the need described in the beginning has been met...” Preaching & the Literary Forms of the Bible, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 71-72.

¹⁸⁷ Robert McKee, Story: Substance, Structure and Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting, (New York, New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1997), 113.

Learning a new homiletical form may feel like a beast blocking your way. Try not to approach storytelling with hostility, as something that's preventing you from preaching 'real' sermons. Approach storytelling as a friend (like a child; like your ally and not your enemy) and maybe you'll come to see it as a blessing instead of a curse.

The subject of story sermons is important. Story is one of the *most powerful ways to communicate ideas because we are a story culture and we relate to story.*

We are a Story Culture

Story is part of the fabric of our thinking. As an electronic culture, we are quite similar to oral culture where the ear and eye work together to receive communication:

A strictly literate era needs no ear; only eyes....we can learn much about preaching in our time from the earliest oral era of human communication. People in those cultures thought in stories. Thinking in stories is one way that we can structure sermons for people in a post-literate world. In a sense we go "back to the future." The thinking mode of oral cultures of long ago holds some possibilities for our preaching in an electronic culture."¹⁸⁸

The way in which our culture receives and transmits information should inform the way preachers preach. Jeff Arthurs indicates five factors that influence how contemporary listeners listen:

- 1.) Contemporary audiences are visual, so the verbal should be augmented with a 'strong visual component.'¹⁸⁹
- 2.) Contemporary audiences suffer from 'information overload' due to the rate of speed at which we communicate.
- 3.) Contemporary listeners crave experiential knowledge.
- 4.) Contemporary listeners "...locate authority in personal experience".¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Richard Jensen, *Thinking In Story* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), 9.

¹⁸⁹ Jeff Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 33.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

- 5.) Contemporary listeners learn and think in a variety of ways.

Story sermons meet the communication needs of contemporary listeners.

- 1.) They are visual because they paint pictures with words.
- 2.) Stories slow things down for the overloaded listener.
- 3.) Stories are inductive, allowing the listener to come to the conclusion on her own without being force fed propositions.
- 4.) Stories are experienced personally through character identification.
- 5.) Story sermons are a different way to communicate ideas.

We Relate to Story

Story is also a powerful means of communication because people relate to stories. Story is natural. It's the way we live life and organize time. We pass our moments inductively, drawing broad principles from the specifics of our life. We are interested in our 'life-story' and other people's stories.

We Enjoy Telling Stories and Listening to Stories

Our culture's love of story is evident by the storytelling renaissance occurring in the U.S.A. right now. People love to tell their stories. StoryCorps, a national project to record people's stories is widely successful.

Stories are also told every day that are not recorded and archived. They are told in family rooms and at the kitchen table; in break rooms and on Interstate 95; over the phone or the internet. People love to tell stories.

If we're not telling our own stories, we're listening to someone else's story. Whether it's in a novel or on television or the Big Screen, we constantly absorb story. As television evolves, the trend over the last decade is reality TV. Reality shows

revolve around the stories of the participants. *Time* recently reported that Trista and Ryan Sutter had their first baby.¹⁹¹ They were the first contestants on the reality television show, *The Bachelorette*. *Time* believes our culture is so wrapped up in their story that the birth of their first child is global news. Kent Edwards says:

“By the time they reach eighteen, children have watched an average of seven years of television. According to the New York Academy of Medicine, “children spend more time in front of the television than in school, and nearly as much time as they spend sleeping.” And children are not the only ones glued to the tube. Television viewing is now the #1 adult leisure activity in America. And what happens when “nothing’s on”? We often catch a movie on the big screen or slip a DVD into our home theater system.”¹⁹²

We Relate to Story through Character Identification

We also relate to story because we identify with a character in the story. Story primarily affects us through character identification. “The great single power in storytelling is the power of identification. And things that have long been in the head, known, begin to move toward the heart, and that’s when life is changed.”¹⁹³

We Relate to Story as a Metaphor for Life

We relate to story because it sets up a scenario that says: “life is like this.” We either believe it or we don’t. Either way, we’re forced to think about it and compare it to our own paradigms. If the story is in line with our way of thinking, then we have affirmation. If it is not, then we are forced to reconcile the differences.

Sometimes stories create their impact not by asking us to see ourselves as one of the characters but by setting forth a “slice of life,” by declaring, “This is how the world really is,” and demanding a response from the reader to the question, Is it true or not? We each have stories by which we define our identity and shape our life. Each new story we encounter is placed alongside the old stories for comparison. Sometimes the new story confirms our world

¹⁹¹ “People: Celebrity Roundup,” *Time Magazine*, August 13, 2007, 23.

¹⁹² Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 14.

¹⁹³ Fred Craddock, “Preaching as Storytelling: How to Rely on Stories to Carry Spiritual Freight,” in *PreachingToday.com*, (accessed April 7, 2007).

view, but on other occasions it challenges that world—and we must choose in which world we will live.¹⁹⁴

Story is one of the most powerful ways to communicate ideas in our culture because we are a story culture and we relate to stories.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 76.

CHAPTER TWO

SETTING THE STAGE

Step I: The First Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is the Selection of a Biblical Text

How do I determine a text to preach?

You've come to the point where you realize storytelling is not a beast after all. Instead of a curse, it's a blessing. You recognize its value. Now you're probably wondering how to determine a text for a story sermon. Maybe you have a great story that would work well as a story sermon. You need to find the idea of the story and carefully match it to a biblical passage that teaches the same idea. A story can suggest a biblical text.

A biblical text can also suggest a story. As you read and study scripture, you might decide that your congregation would be best served if a particular passage were preached as a story sermon. Maybe a story comes readily to your mind. Or, maybe you are drawn to your files in search of a story that fits the idea communicated in the biblical text. Regardless of which comes first, the story or the text, it is essential that the biblical text guides the sermon.

When choosing a text from which to preach a story sermon, be aware of two things: the needs of your audience and the preaching occasion.¹⁹⁵ Stories are particularly helpful in influencing listeners who are hostile or apathetic toward the gospel. "Telling a story is like building a sandcastle in the sand instead of drawing a line in the sand. You invite curiosity, build interest, and encourage participation so that in their enthusiasm your listeners end up on 'your side' without ever having to

¹⁹⁵ Torrey Robinson, "Expository First-Person Preaching," 63.

acknowledge that they've crossed a line.”¹⁹⁶ The preaching occasion also warrants consideration when determining if a text should be preached as a story sermon. Certain Sundays on the church calendar might be more appropriate for a story sermon than others.

What biblical texts can be used for story sermons?

Are some texts better suited for story sermons than others? A story sermon can be preached from any text. Story sermons can be based on many different biblical genres, even Old Testament narratives. Historical narratives can be translated into modern stories that demonstrate the idea of the passage. The building of the Tower of Babel could be relocated to the 21st century in any major U.S. city and easily applied to the modern listener. The Israelites decision to support the negative report of the ten spies instead of the hopeful report of the two spies could be demonstrated in a story that grapples with fear and trust.

Prophetic books can also be a source for story. Jonah's journey as an agent of God beckons a modern story of flight, provision and disappointment in God. Daniel's determination to honor God despite his hostile surroundings could be translated into a story about God-honoring decisions.

The danger in preaching story sermons based on narrative portions of Scripture is that the historical context cannot be weaved into the story. The sermon could become so detached from the biblical text that it is mistaken for moralizing. In order to ground the sermon in the biblical context, explanation prior to the sermon sets the biblical text in its proper historical context. If a story sermon is going to be used instead of a narrative sermon, it must be for good reason. Typically, the reason

¹⁹⁶ Annette Simmons, The Story Factor, 165.

has to do with the audience. If the audience is unfamiliar with the Bible or even hostile toward it or if the audience does not believe in the authority of God's word, then it might be wise preach a story sermon. Otherwise, narrative portions of scripture are best left to narrative sermons¹⁹⁷

Portions of the Old Testament law come alive when a law is seen through the lens of a story. A preacher could propositionally expound the commandment, 'do not covet' and the congregation could recite a textbook definition of covetousness. Or, a preacher could tell a story about covetousness. Talk about the inner turmoil that tormented Mr. Henry Smith while he outwardly followed rules, but secretly coveted. Through the course of the story, the listener is drawn into the realm of identification. When character identification occurs, the identification of sin has also occurred in the listener's life. The ailing listener awaits the remedy.

Perhaps Proverbs, parables, sayings and shorter epistolary passages lend themselves best to story sermons. The exegesis for these passages is no different from the exegesis for a traditional sermon. Proverbs, parables and sayings are good starting places for story sermons because for the most part, their context does not have to be weaved into the sermon. Dipping into the well of Proverbs provides a fine selection for a story sermon. The wisdom of the proverb comes alive through a story

¹⁹⁷ Haddon Robinson says, "In a narrative sermon...a major idea continues to be supported by other ideas, but the content supporting the points is drawn directly from the incidents in the story." (*Biblical Preaching*, 130). Kent Edwards suggests following a story-shaping form for narrative passages in a *PreachingToday.com* article entitled, "Stories Are for Adults". Edwards' *story-shaping* sermon form relies on the mono-myth to tell a biblical story that is faithful to the idea of the text and intended purpose for the audience.¹⁹⁷ Eugene Lowry advocates use of a similar technique in his book, *The Homiletical Plot*.

that makes the proverb understandable and applicable. A short proverb that lies flat on the page is quickly made modern and relevant when seen through the lens of story.

The parables of Jesus are excellent choices for story sermons when they are transformed into modern-day parables. Since historical context and detail are inconsequential, parables are easy to modernize. Philip Yancey wrote a compelling contemporary version of the Prodigal Son.¹⁹⁸

Jesus has many sayings that are much like proverbs. Sometimes these sayings can be best understood and applied through story. In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.”¹⁹⁹ Tell a story demonstrating the principle that carelessness with the faith damages the individual and the faith. Paint a vivid picture that makes this foggy saying crystal clear. Either before or after the story sermon, place the story in its proper context within the Sermon on the Mount. Communicate its relationship to the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.

A passage from an epistle can also be the basis for a story sermon. A story sermon could be told based on Paul’s discussion of unity in Ephesians²⁰⁰. Here’s an opportunity to write your own story. Use your imagination. Picture a church that is marked by biblical unity. The image of a mature church reveals individuals united in using their gifts in love to build God’s kingdom. Use story to help people *see* what unity looks like. Use story to help people *long* for it.

¹⁹⁸ Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace, (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), 49-51.

¹⁹⁹ Matthew 7:6

²⁰⁰ Ephesians 4:1-16

Skeptics might argue that some biblical texts should undoubtedly be left unscathed by story. Texts like the Resurrection account could never be transformed into story, right? Not exactly. C.S. Lewis masterfully unfolded the gospel story in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As preachers of God's Word, we are obligated to preach the gospel to people in a way that best communicates that truth. If a story about a lion, a witch and a wardrobe brings someone to faith in Jesus Christ, then the gospel has been effectively preached through story.

One difficulty with storytelling as preaching is being unable to include exegetical detail into the story sermon. Any pertinent information that cannot be included in the story itself must precede the story-sermon or subsequently follow it. Another concern is that the listener won't grasp the connection between the story and the text. A concerted effort must be made to ensure the listener understands the bond between the story sermon and the biblical text.

Determine a complete unit of thought

Regardless of what text you choose for a story sermon, the passage must be a complete unit of thought. Robinson says, "Base the sermon on a literary unit of biblical thought."²⁰¹ In a letter, a unit of thought is typically a paragraph. Fee and Stuart say: "We simply cannot stress enough the importance of your learning to THINK PARAGRAPHS..."²⁰²

The book of Proverbs proves more difficult in determining units of thought, particularly in chapters 10-31 where individual proverbs appear unrelated. Some commentators suggest combining proverbs by theme in order to form a logical

²⁰¹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 55.

²⁰² Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 64.

framework.²⁰³ Other commentators suggest that many of the proverbs that appear to be unconnected are actually related.²⁰⁴

The gospels include teachings or sayings *of* Jesus and stories *about* Jesus.²⁰⁵ Again, you must determine where a passage begins and ends to properly interpret it. “Accurate exegesis demands that you select a whole story, a whole paragraph, an entire unit of thought, not just a fragment of a text.”²⁰⁶

Step II: The Second Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is Exegeting the Passage

Determine what the passage teaches. You are looking for authorial intent. What was the author saying to his listeners? This process is called exegesis. Exegesis is “...the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.”²⁰⁷ Exegesis varies somewhat according to biblical genre.

1. Determine the exegetical idea of the passage.

The first step of exegesis for a story sermon is finding the central idea of the passage. Sometimes the idea is made clear early on in sermon preparation. It jumps right out at you, like a shooting star bursting from the night sky. More often, grasping the idea is the most difficult task of sermon preparation. It’s no small task. It’s more like trying to capture a shooting star. When you unearth the exegetical idea of the passage, you use all of your exegetical tools to understand the intent of the author. A historical, grammatical and literary analysis of the text are essential when studying a biblical text. When you feel like you’re lost in space, remember that the

²⁰³ See Derek Kidner, The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1969).

²⁰⁴ See Bruce Waltke, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing House, 2004).

²⁰⁵ Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, 127.

²⁰⁶ Torrey Robinson, “Expository First-Person Preaching,” 64.

²⁰⁷ Fee and Stuart, How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth, 23.

idea is caught when you understand the components of an idea—subject and complement.

The central idea²⁰⁸ is determined by asking two questions: What is the author talking about? (subject) and what is the author saying about what he’s talking about? (complement). Wrestle with these questions in order to pin down the exegetical idea as precisely as possible. The answer to these questions should encompass all of the details of the biblical passage. Haddon Robinson says that “We do not understand what we are reading unless we can clearly express the subject and complement of the section we are studying.”²⁰⁹ Finding the subject and complement requires patience and perseverance. Once the biblical idea has been pinned, you’ve won the exegetical match. You’re well on your way to round two.

2. Analyze the characters in a character driven text

After the idea is found, the steps of exegesis vary somewhat according to biblical genre. Texts that are character driven (i.e., parables, historical narratives, some prophetic books) should undergo a character analysis. If modernizing a parable, determine the mood of the characters in the parable. Use your imagination to learn how they might think, behave or react. Try to walk a mile in their sandals. This is essential if you want to create characters for your story sermon that accurately reflect that attitude of the characters in the biblical text.

If you’re working with Old Testament historical narrative, analyze the characters by looking at the choices they make. How did Abraham come to climb Mount Moriah with the intention of sacrificing his one and only son? Ask how

²⁰⁸ See Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, chapter two, “What’s the Big Idea?”

²⁰⁹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 46.

biblical people respond to conflict. How did Moses deal with Pharaoh? How did Elijah fare with Jezebel? While researching stories about Jesus or sayings of Jesus in the gospels, try to identify all of the players. Examine them in terms of their relationship to Jesus. Are they disciples, part of the crowd or enemies?

3. Analyze the historical, cultural, geographical setting of the text.

Although your story will likely take place in a different historical, cultural and geographical setting, you want to know your text well enough so that you can translate essential characteristics and find or write the most appropriate story for your text. This research will be most explicit in the words that introduce your story.

4. Determine how Jesus used a parable.

If modernizing one of Jesus' parables, determine how he used the parable. What was his purpose in preaching a parable? Was it explained or left open-ended? Who was his audience? Apply the mono-mythic cycle to the parable in order to grasp the conflict and flow of the story. This research will be significant when you shape your story.

Summary

As an expositor of God's word, you must make every effort to prepare a sermon that will honor God and speak to His people. The first step in preparing an expository story sermon is selecting a biblical text. You can choose any passage from the Bible as long as it is a complete unit of thought. Be aware of the preaching occasion and the needs of your audience. The second step involves the exegesis of the biblical passage. Determine the idea of the passage; explore the characters in the passage; research the text by analyzing its history, grammar and literary genre. All of

this preparation will serve you well as you serve your congregation with the word of God. An expositor claims to speak the word of God, so you never want to enter the pulpit lightly or unadvisedly. Be prepared!

Nasrudin, a wise yet sometimes foolish man, was invited by village elders to speak in their village mosque for three consecutive weeks. Nasrudin, who knew he had many wise ideas in his head, had foolishly neglected to prepare a sermon. That first morning, he stood at the door of the mosque, puffed out his chest and decided to wing it. He turned to the people and asked, “My beloved, who amongst you knows that of which I speak?” and the people looked down and said, “We are poor simple people. We do not know that of which you speak.” He then threw his robe across one shoulder and pronounced, “Well, then there is no need of me here” and marched right out the door.

The people were curious and the next week when Nasrudin was to speak even more gathered. Again, Nasrudin had not bothered to prepare his thoughts. He strode to the front and turned to the people and asked, “My beloved, who amongst you knows that of which I speak?” and this time the people stood up and said, “We do! We know that of which you speak!” Old Nasrudin didn’t miss a beat. He threw his robe across his shoulder and said, “Well, then there is no need of me here.” And marched out the door.

On the morning of the third week, Nasrudin stood no more prepared than that first day. He confidently walked to the front and turned to the people and asked once more, “My beloved, who among you knows that of which I speak?” This time they had a plan! Half of the people said, “We are poor simple people. We do not know that of which you speak.” And the other half stood up and said, “We do! We know that of which you speak!” Old Nasrudin stood for a moment and said, “Then if those of you who know would tell those who don’t, there is no need of me here.” With that, he threw his robe across his shoulder and left the building. (Sufi Teaching Story)²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Annette Simmons, The Story Factor, 50.

CHAPTER THREE

THAT'S MY STORY AND I'M STICKING TO IT!

Step III: The Third Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is Choosing the Best Story for Your Preaching Idea and Purpose

You have a text and an idea. You've researched your text. Your exegetical work is complete. You're getting anxious to find or write a story to tell. But first, you need a preaching idea and a purpose to help you select or write the best story for your text. These steps must be taken or else you'll have nothing to tell.

1. State the story sermon's homiletical idea

The homiletical idea is essentially stating the exegetical idea in modern, memorable language. This is the kernel of truth that you want your listeners to grasp. If they remember anything from your sermon, it should be the homiletical idea. The homiletical idea is your sermon in a sentence.

Sometimes the homiletical idea is identical to the exegetical idea. Biblical texts that are already stated as universal principles do not need to be modernized or updated. Phrases like, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' 'a gentle answer turns away wrath' or 'do not steal' need no translation into 21st century language. They stand the test of time.

Most often, the language of your exegetical idea will not be sufficient for a homiletical idea. It is too closely tied to the language of the text and the biblical world. Haddon Robinson says, "Remember that you are not lecturing to people about the Bible. You are talking to people about themselves from the Bible."²¹¹ You want a phrase that is general and particular at the same time. "...the purpose of a

²¹¹ Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 104.

generalization is to cause our hearer to understand some phase of reality. On the other hand, the function of particulars is to present concrete details of that phase of reality in such a way as to cause our hearer to experience that reality for himself.”²¹² The generality of the phrase distills the many parts of the sermon into one single, memorable meaning. The specificity of the phrase emphasizes that you are preaching to particular audience in the 21st century. Remember that your homiletical idea will be preached in your story sermon. If your homiletical idea is too specific to the text, then it won’t be transferable to your story. If it is too broad, then it won’t be relevant to your listeners.

Determining your homiletical idea will also make researching or writing a story much easier. For example, the exegetical idea found in Romans 6 will be difficult to find in a story: “Through their union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, Christians have died to the rule of sin and are alive to holiness.” But, you will find a story that demonstrates the homiletical idea: “You are not the person you used to be; therefore, don’t handle life as you used to handle it.”²¹³

When writing your homiletical idea, use language that is vivid and easily remembered. H. Grady Davis offers this advice: “...have all of the essential words right, and all the dispensable words absent.”²¹⁴

2. Determine your story sermon purpose

You now know the exegetical idea of the biblical text and you’ve translated it into a pithy saying for a modern audience. You’ve determined what the author was saying to his audience. Now you want to ask ‘why am *I* saying what *I’m* saying?’

²¹² H. Grady Davis, Design for Preaching, 246.

²¹³ Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 105.

²¹⁴ H. Grady Davis, Design for Preaching, 245.

What is your purpose? What do you want to accomplish in your listeners as a result of preaching this story sermon? After hearing your story, how should the audience react, feel, or think? What should they know, believe or understand? How should they change? At the top of every page of notes, write your exegetical idea and your purpose statement. Your purpose statement will begin: ‘As a result of this story, I want my listeners to...*understand that Jesus paid the price for their sin.*’ Or, ‘As a result of this story, I want my listeners to...*actively love those around them or give joyfully to the work of the Lord or control their tongue in their interactions with others.*’

When you ask what you want accomplished in telling your story, you’ll find a story that serves your purpose. Otherwise, the intended purpose of your sermon may not match the actual result of your sermon. You and your congregation will be at cross-purposes. Take the time to think through your purpose!

3. Determine what mood you want your story to convey

You have your exegetical idea and your purpose. Now you can determine the mood of your story. Mood prepares the listener for what they will hear. It creates a certain atmosphere through dialogue, description of character and setting. What kind of story will best accomplish your purposes in preaching? What kind of story are you looking for or writing? A serious story, a light-hearted story, a children’s story, a fable, a popular story? Does your desired mood come from a specific culture?

If you want your listeners to leave church bounding with joy and enthusiasm for their new life in Christ, then you’ll choose a story of celebration and delight. If you want your listeners to feel the weight of their sin debt, then you’ll choose a

reflective, somber story. If you want your listeners to continue to ponder your story sermon even after the worship service is over, then you might choose a story of irony.

4. Look at the calendar

Before choosing or writing a story, look at the calendar. If you are celebrating Multiculturalism Sunday, you might look for a story from a different culture. If you're celebrating a local holiday like Yankee Homecoming, you might choose a more provincial tale. Is it Children's Sunday or Mother's Day or Father's Day? Are you in the season of Advent or Lent? Patriot's Day, 4th of July, Memorial Day or Labor Day? Stories of family and freedom abound. Allow your calendar to locate your story.

5. Select a story

You've done your exegetical work. You've translated your exegetical idea into a homiletical idea. You've determined your purpose in preaching a story sermon and the mood you want conveyed. You've looked at your calendar. Now you can save precious time and energy by beginning your search for a story in the right place.

Heed a warning

You might be tempted to tell the story of a well-known historical or popular figure. Resist the temptation! Heed this warning: Use the life story of an unknown person. Wonderful stories are often found in biographical works. Lessons can always be gleaned from somebody else's life story. Do not use the life story of Abraham Lincoln or Michael Jordan. These stories are best used as illustrations in traditional sermons. The danger is that the sermon will sound like a biography on an important historical or cultural figure. As interesting as it may be, you are not giving

a history lecture or a biographical data report. The purpose of your story is not to enlighten people about FDR's New Deal or the inner workings of the Supreme Court. You don't want the story behind Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent light bulb to cast a shadow on the Light of the World. The tale of Benjamin Franklin's invention of the bifocal won't put the Bible into focus. A story sermon is not a rehearsal of the events of the Boston Tea Party or Betsy Ross's first famous stitch or Lance Armstrong's sixth consecutive win.

Instead, look at traditional tales, folktales, fables and legends. Traditional tales abound in every culture. Every culture has stories. Many of these oral stories have been written down in collections. Tell a traditional tale with a new twist. Did you know there are over 700 versions of Cinderella? Since folklore and folktales are owned by the public, they can be customized to fit your needs and the needs of the audience. Some variations of traditional tales are told by certain tellers in a specific way. They have made the stories 'their own.' Give credit where credit is due.²¹⁵ Never tell another storyteller's personal story as your own.²¹⁶

You can find stories for telling on CD. Look at the National Storytelling Network. Obtain recordings from the National Storytelling Festival.

Short stories provide a wealth of information for story sermons. Who are some of your favorite authors? Flannery O'Connor? Leo Tolstoy? John Updike? What are your most loved short stories? "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson? "The Gift

²¹⁵ "Folklore and folktales are owned by the public, but a specific version told by an individual teller or found in a collection is the teller's or author's copyrighted property. If you like a folktale a storyteller has told, ask that teller for a reference of where it can be found. Research the story by finding other versions, and then tell it your way." (A Beginner's Guide to Storytelling, "Storytelling Etiquette", 54).

²¹⁶ "A storyteller's personal, family, and original stories are her/his copyrighted property. It is unethical and illegal to tell another person's original, personal, and family stories without the permission of the author/storyteller." (A Beginner's Guide to Storytelling, "Storytelling Etiquette", 54).

of the Magi” by O. Henry, “A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner or “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe? What attracts you to them?

Collect stories and begin your own story bank. Organizations, activist groups, colleges and universities make effective use of story banks.²¹⁷ Decide how you want to catalogue your stories. You can catalogue them by culture, by idea or theme, by type, by Scripture reference. Cross reference your files. Type out or photocopy whole stories or use index cards with brief descriptions of stories and their reference.

Instead of selecting a story, you can write your own story. This is a good exercise for anyone who speaks regularly. Writing sharpens speaking skills and encourages creativity and imagination.

Writing your own story is like painting on a blank canvas. The possibilities are plentiful. You can create vivid characters and set a tone that best serves your preaching purpose. Starting from scratch may seem intimidating, but the process and the end result make the effort worthwhile. A subsequent chapter will deal with the mechanics of writing.

Summary

Before you can select a story or write one of your own, you must translate your exegetical idea into modern, relevant language. Then, determine your story sermon’s purpose. After your purpose is nailed down, identify what mood you want your story to convey. Look at your calendar to make sure your story is appropriate for the occasion and then select a story. Find your story in the wellspring of ancient folklore or contemporary short stories. Or, consider writing your own.

²¹⁷ One example is Stanford University, storybank.stanford.edu; see ‘The Art of Story Banking’ Families USA online newsletter, ImPRESSive, July 1999, (familiesusa.org/resources/tools-for-advocates/tips/impressive.html)

CHAPTER FOUR

FOLLOW THE SEASONS

Step IV: The Fourth Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is Analyzing the Story's Structure

*“For better or worse, an event throws a character’s life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance, launching him on a Quest for his Object of Desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extra-personal). He may or may not achieve it. This is story in a nutshell.”*²¹⁸

You have your idea and your story. Now you want to make sure that the overall flow of your story moves in a way that provides maximum emotional satisfaction to the listener. Your story needs structure.

Screenwriting coach Robert McKee defines structure as “...a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.”²¹⁹ The best way to structure the events of your story is to follow the pattern of the mono-mythic cycle. This cycle provides a flow for story progression. Story experts argue that the mono-mythic cycle is a universal pattern found in most stories throughout the world. As its name suggests, the mono-mythic cycle is a one-story cycle, a universal template for story²²⁰. The mono-mythic cycle can be compared to the four seasons. *Summer* is a state of bliss. This season never lasts long because the lack of conflict and tension fosters boredom. *Fall* contains the scenes that move the plot away from summer. The ‘inciting event’ propels the story and its characters into Fall by throwing life out of balance. *Winter* is as bad as life can be and the characters despair that things may

²¹⁸ Robert McKee, *Story*, 197.

²¹⁹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 33.

²²⁰ Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 43.

never improve. The *surprising twist* in the plot moves the story into *Spring* where the tension is relieved. The cycle is complete when we find ourselves back in summer. We can apply the mono-mythic cycle to the grand story of Scripture.²²¹ *Summer* occurs in the Garden of Eden. The *inciting event* occurs when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and propel all of humanity into *Fall*. *Winter* is the death of Jesus where life is as bad as it could possibly be. The surprising twist is Jesus' resurrection, leading us into *Spring*. *Summer* will arrive when King Jesus returns. The mono-mythic cycle can also be applied to individual stories in the Bible.²²²

Structure provides "...progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking choices and actions, gradually revealing their true natures, even down to the unconscious self."²²³ The mono-mythic cycle provides a skeleton of structure for any story. It helps the writer to sequence the events of her story so that the story makes forward progress with emotional impact.

Let's apply the mono-mythic cycle to the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke, chapter 10, verses 30-35. Try to identify the following: Summer, inciting incident, fall, winter, surprising twist in the plot, spring and summer II.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of

²²¹ Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 47-50

²²² See Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Preaching*, 53-55 to see how he applies the mono-mythic cycle to Daniel 1.

²²³ Robert McKee, *Story*, 105-106.

him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Summer (v. 30a)

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho,

Inciting Incident (v. 30b)

when he fell into the hands of robbers.

Fall (v. 30c)

They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

Winter—(vv. 31-32) *The injured man’s best bet was with the clergy. If they neglected to help him, surely nobody else would.*

A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Surprising Twist in Plot (v. 33)

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him

Spring— (v. 34) *things start to improve*

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper.

Summer—(v. 35) *implied that the man will make a full recovery and all medical expenses will be paid. The Samaritan will do whatever it takes to ensure the injured man’s recovery.*

‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Summary

The mono-mythic cycle serves as a guide to story flow by harnessing tension and conflict.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHOW AND (DON'T) TELL

Step V: The Fifth Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is Introducing Your Text and Story

You may be wondering why you bothered studying your text at any great length. Many of your historical, geographical and cultural details seem to have no place to rest their head in a story sermon. But all of the tools of exegesis are essential to preaching expository story sermons. Through exegesis you have mined the meaning of the text. That meaning informs and guides your story sermon. You have enriched your understanding of the world of the biblical writer, therefore capturing his idea better. The remaining information that is pertinent to your preaching purpose must now be included either preceding or following your story.

1. Gain attention by surfacing a need

You want to gain your listener's attention from the beginning. Your first statement should be an interesting statement that grabs attention. But you need more than an interesting statement to hold attention and make people want to hear more. You gain attention by saying something interesting that surfaces a need. People are most interested in what they have a need for.²²⁴ Talking about macular degeneration to an audience of young people with 20/20 vision won't be interesting. They might respond to your opening statement: "Macular degeneration...is the leading cause of vision loss and blindness in Americans aged 65 and older"²²⁵ with a wide yawn and a blank stare. But that same statistic spoken to seniors who will soon begin treatment

²²⁴ Christian Courses, "Public Speaking," [www.http://christiancourses.com](http://christiancourses.com) (accessed February 2, 2007).

²²⁵ All About Vision, "Macular Holes," <http://allaboutvision.com> (accessed May 3, 2007).

for the disease will capture attention. People will listen if you state a felt need up front. They want answers.

2. Introduce your text as providing the answer to the need just raised.

Next, introduce your scripture passage as offering the way in which the need can be met, resolved or understood. Direct the listeners to the Bible for answers. Let them know that the Bible is the place Christians go for everyday wisdom.

Comment on the passage that your listeners are about to hear. Give your listeners clues before you read the text. Tell them what you want them to look for.

3. Give pertinent historical and exegetical information

Place the text in its proper context. Say, ‘this text was written by the Apostle Paul to a business man named Philemon. Philemon’s slave, Onesimus, stole from his master and ran away. During Onesimus’ flight, he met Paul and became a Christian. Paul wrote this personal appeal to ask Philemon to graciously take back his runaway slave. He wanted Philemon to act in love and forgiveness.’

4. Read the scripture passage

In some traditions, the reading of the scripture passage comes before the sermon. You don’t have to read the passage again, simply direct your listeners back to the passage and refresh their memories.

5. Introduce your story

Introduce your story. Let the congregation know that you are preaching a different type of sermon. Your comments can be brief. Simply say, ‘this morning I’d like to tell you a story that reflects the truth of this passage.’ If you are modernizing a parable, tell your congregation what you are doing. Give them a road map. Let your

hearers know that you have written a contemporary version of one of Jesus' parables. Say, 'this is what this parable might look like today.'

Summary

Raise a need in your introduction and show listeners how that need is answered in the Bible. Introduce your story sermon with pertinent exegetical information.

Step VI: The Sixth Step in Preparing an Expository Story Sermon is Writing Concluding Remarks and Properly Placing Your Big Idea

In a story sermon there are three alternatives for expressing your homiletical idea.

1. State your homiletical idea within your story

Since stories are inductive, the homiletical idea won't be stated until the conclusion of your story. It might be embedded within your story somewhere in spring or summer II in the mono-mythic cycle.

Use this option only when the homiletical idea fits naturally into your story. It shouldn't sound like it's being imposed upon the story or tacked on to the story as an afterthought. This option works well when the wording of the homiletical idea is derived directly from wording found within the story.

2. State your homiletical idea after you tell your story

Or, you might choose to state your homiletical idea after the story has concluded in a more traditional sermon conclusion. Conclude your story and then wrap up the sermon with a brief summary, adequate petitions, applications, closing appeals and statement of the central idea. This is an occasion to draw the listener back to the text in order to see the relationship between text and story. This is also

the time to make sure the central idea has been heard. Repeat it. Restate it.

Remember the conclusion to any story "...must not drag on and on."²²⁶

3. *Don't state your homiletical idea at all*

Story works best when ideas are not stated propositionally. Instead, they are given indirectly. In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson cites an example from a *Time* interview of film director Stanley Kubrick: "The essence of dramatic form is to let an idea come over people without its being plainly stated. When you say something directly, it is simply not as potent as it is when you allow people to discover it for themselves."²²⁷

Ideas are conveyed indirectly when they are demonstrated through character actions and dialogue. Novelist Stephen King encourages the use of this practice. For instance, King argues, if a writer wants to convey the idea that *Tom is divorced*, he should not explicitly state the fact:

"'Hello, ex-wife,' Tom said to Doris as she entered the room. A more effective way to communicate the information is: 'Hi, Doris,' Tom said. His voice sounded natural enough—to his own ears, at least—but the fingers of his right hand crept to the place where his wedding ring had been until six months ago."²²⁸

The idea is obvious, but it hasn't been stated directly. The idea should be so clear that it doesn't have to be stated. Story presses ideas into the heart and the head as listeners identify with characters while the story progresses through a sequence of unfolding events. "A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of

²²⁶ Bill Oudemolen, "How to Preach Like John Grisham Writes" in PreachingToday.com (accessed February 8, 2007).

²²⁷ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 125.

²²⁸ Stephen King, *On Writing*, 226.

its events.”²²⁹ If the idea of your story can be powerfully conveyed indirectly, then your sermon is over at the conclusion of your story.

Deciding how much historical and exegetical information needs to be disseminated and when it should be dispensed is a decision every preacher must make, regardless of sermon form. This information could be discussed prior to the story sermon in a sermon introduction or after the story sermon in a separate conclusion. Will you conclude your sermon with the story itself or will you draw applications for your listeners and make connections between your story and the biblical text? Whatever you choose, be careful not to over explain. A story that has to be explained loses its effect.

Summary

You can do three things with your homiletical idea: 1.) State it within the body of the story-sermon; 2.) State it after the story-sermon is told—in a separate conclusion or 3.) Don’t state it all, but make sure the idea comes across implicitly.

²²⁹ Robert McKee, Story, 114.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ELEMENTS OF A GOOD STORY

Not all stories are created equal. Whether you're writing your own story or searching for one in your story bank, you want it to be a good story. Effective stories contain certain elements.²³⁰

Stories Need Conflict

All stories need conflict. Once the conflict is over, the story is over. Conflict drives the tension and keeps the listener wanting more. There are different kinds of conflict.²³¹ Some conflict is found within oneself—it's inner conflict. Other conflict is personal—between two or more people. Extra-personal conflict is difficulty with nature or an institution. Conflict drives the story. Since listeners yearn for resolution, only tension found in conflict keeps them listening. If we give them resolution too soon, we've lost the tension and we've lost the listener. If we don't give it to them soon enough, we also lose them in frustration.

In the mono-mythic cycle, conflict begins with the inciting event.²³² This event propels the story into Fall. Something happens that throws life out of balance for the protagonist. The protagonist begins a search or a journey to restore balance. Her first attempt at restoring balance is an unexpected reaction by an individual,

²³⁰ Robert McKee says a story has a five part design: "The *Inciting Incident*, the first major event of the telling, is the primary cause for all that follows, putting into motion the other four elements—*Progressive Complication*, *Crisis*, *Climax*, *Resolution*." (*Story*, 181)

²³¹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 213.

²³² McKee says "...the Inciting Incident first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance. Out of this need...the protagonist next conceives of an Object of Desire: something physical or situational or attitudinal that he feels he lacks or needs to put the ship of life on an even keel. Lastly, the Inciting Incident propels the protagonist into an active pursuit of this object or goal."²³²

nature or institution. This is called the *gap*²³³ and this is where the story is born.

There exists a gap between the way the protagonist expects the world to react and the way the world actually reacts. The listener, along with the protagonist, soon discovers that restoring balance is not going to be easy. There is conflict.

Stories Need Characters

Believable characters

Stories need characters and characters must be credible. A character is believable when his abilities match his accomplishments and his qualities equal his quests. A strong character needs to have the strength to swim an ocean; a brave character needs to have the courage to challenge a beast; a smart character needs the intelligence to solve an equation. A strong character needs to do strong things; a courageous character needs to be brave; a weak character must flee from danger. A weak character wouldn't swim an ocean and a coward wouldn't stand up to a beast and an imbecile couldn't solve an equation.

Believable characters also come in shades of gray. She is never 100% good or 100% bad. Characters will have more depth when you portray them as a blend of good and bad.

Put simply, a character must be credible: young enough or old enough, strong or weak, worldly or naïve, educated or ignorant, generous or selfish, witty or dull, in the right proportions. Each must bring to the story the combination of qualities that allows an audience to believe that the character could and would do what he does.²³⁴

²³³ McKee: "This reaction from his world blocks his desire, thwarting him and bending him further from his desire than he was before he took this action. Rather than evoking cooperation from his world, his action provokes forces of antagonism that open up the *gap* between his subjective expectation and the objective result, between what he thought would happen when he took his action and what in fact does happen between his sense of probability and true necessity." (148)

²³⁴ Robert McKee, Story, 106.

Characters make choices under pressure

A character is also believable when she is forced to make choices under pressure. Real people make decisions. Characters must make decisions. “The choice between good and evil or between right and wrong is no choice at all.”²³⁵ True choice is dilemma and it forces the character to make a choice between irreconcilable goods—the character desires two things, but can only have one, or a choice between the lesser of two evils—the character wants neither thing, but circumstances force him to choose one.²³⁶ We understand the true identity of a character when we see the choices they make under pressure.

Choices made when nothing is at risk mean little. If a character chooses to tell the truth in a situation where telling a lie would gain him nothing, the choice is trivial, the moment expresses nothing. But if the same character insists on telling the truth when a lie would save his life, then we sense that honesty is at the core of his nature.²³⁷

The Protagonist

Every story needs a character who acts as the story’s protagonist.²³⁸ The protagonist, or hero, is a willful character who pursues an object of desire and gains the empathy of the audience. Empathy means ‘like me’ and sympathy means ‘likable.’²³⁹ Listeners *must* relate to the protagonist. They don’t have to love or even like the protagonist, but they do have to identify with him.

²³⁵ Robert McKee, *Story*, 249.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

²³⁸ Robert McKee says the protagonist has the following qualities: A PROTAGONIST is a willful character The PROTAGONIST has a conscious desire; The PROTAGONIST may also have a self-contradictory unconscious desire; The PROTAGONIST has the capacities to pursue the Object of Desire convincingly; The PROTAGONIST must have at least a chance to attain his desire; The PROTAGONIST has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre; The PROTAGONIST must be empathetic; he may or may not be sympathetic (pp. 137-141)

²³⁹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 141.

Stories Need a Setting

Knowing the world of your story is what prevents story from becoming cliché and predictable. Setting is essential to good writing because it allows the imagination to be used to its maximum effect:

“The larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore the fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices. Result: a fully original story and victory in the war on cliché.”²⁴⁰

McKee says setting involves four aspects: period, duration, location and level of conflict.²⁴¹

Period

Period is a story’s place in time. Does the story take place right now? Is it set during the Revolutionary War or during the 1950’s?

Duration

Duration is a story’s length through time. How much time passes over the course of the story? Is it minutes, hours, days, months or years?

Location

Location is a story’s place in space. Does the story take place in Pittsburgh or Podunk? On Main street or Maple street? On a 50-acre estate or a brick tenement? On the ocean or on the desert.

Level of conflict

²⁴⁰ Robert McKee, *Story* 72.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 68.

Level of conflict is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.²⁴²

Is the struggle an inner battle or personal? Is it fought against institutions or nature?

Know the world of your story.

Stories Contain Dialogue and Concise Wording

Dialogue enhances a story by affording the listener a chance to eavesdrop or overhear the thoughts of a character. Dialogue should be used with economy, direction and purpose.²⁴³ People cannot turn the page to re-read the dialogue in your story. They hear it only once, so it must be clear and memorable. Dialogue must contribute to the overall movement and goal of the story. Otherwise, don't include it. Make sure to use language that your character would use.

In general, long sentences littered with adjectives and descriptive phrases only clutter your listener's mind. Concentrate on short, vivid, active verbs. Instead of saying 'he went down the street,' say, 'he stumbled down the alley.' Replace 'she drove the car' with 'she maneuvered the '84 Chevette.'

Stories Need Unity, Order and Progress

Stories, and sermons, must have three essential elements: unity, order and progress.

A story is a unity

A story is a unity. Story is the culmination of all of its elements.

A beautifully told story is a symphonic unity in which structure, setting, character, genre, and idea meld seamlessly. To find their harmony, the writer must study the elements of story as if they were instruments of an orchestra—first separately, then in concert.”²⁴⁴

²⁴² Robert McKee, Story, 68-69.

²⁴³ Ibid., 389.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., Story, 29.

A story has order

Plot orders the events of story into meaningful relationships so that the story becomes a unity rather than a series of unconnected events. You choose which events to include in your story and in which order through plot. “To PLOT means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer’s choice of events and their design in time.”²⁴⁵

A story has the element of progress

This sequence of events builds to the climax of the story. Your story needs to be going somewhere. People need to feel that the story is making forward progress. The quarterback always throws the football down the field, toward the goalpost.

A good story progresses toward the climax. “A STORY must build to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.”²⁴⁶ Your story is a progression toward an end. The climax is an event of maximum emotional force that carries the listener from winter into spring. McKee says climactic “...doesn’t mean short and explosive; it means *profound change*.”²⁴⁷ The surprising twist of the story is located at the heart of the story’s climax. The climax brings the idea of the story into sharp focus. “This Climax of the last act is a final action that excites and moves you, that feels complete and satisfying. The Controlling Idea is now at hand.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Robert McKee, *Story*, 43.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 293.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

Resolution

Most stories progress past the climax, toward resolution. Loose ends are tied up. Following the mono-mythic cycle, the protagonist receives her object of desire and equilibrium returns. Real change has occurred in the hero's life—inwardly, outwardly or both. Resolution gives the listener the opportunity to recover from the emotional high of the climax. "In good stories and sermons, the denouement (or resolution) is brief."²⁴⁹

There are times, however, when the story doesn't entirely resolve itself. Take for instance The Prodigal Son in Luke 15. This partial resolution leaves the audience questioning what happened to the older son. Did he accept his father's kindness? Did he begin to see his father as loving and good or did he continue to despise his service to his father? Story endings such as these invite the listener to make a decision. '*What would I do?*' the listener asks. This type of ending demands a response from the listener and is especially effective in preaching.

Maybe all of this sounds too rigid and you fear your story will lack creativity if you follow these steps. You don't want to be boxed in by literary boundaries. But quite the opposite is true. A story that employs these principles will not be lifeless or stilted. Instead, it will be an oasis for imagination. "When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl."²⁵⁰ And that's where the writing process begins—with your imagination. It is to the subject of imagination that we turn to next.

²⁴⁹ Bill Oudemolen, "How to Preach Like John Grisham Writes" (accessed February 5, 2007).

²⁵⁰ Robert McKee, *Story*, 131 quoting T.S. Eliot.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAILOR-MADE IMAGINATION!

Maybe you're worried about getting your creative juices flowing and fear you'll never find the idea that will spark a story.

There was once a poor tailor. Poor, though he worked hard, making all kinds of clothes for all kinds of people. But he never had enough money to buy the material to make an overcoat for himself. And that is what he wanted. He wanted one so much that he started to save; save his money bit by bit, bit by bit until at last he had enough. He cut the material carefully so as to not waste any. And he sewed up the coat and tried it on and it fit perfectly. He was proud of that coat. He wore it even when it was the least bit cold. He wore it 'til it was all worn out. At least he thought it was all worn out, but then he looked and he saw there was quite a bit of good material left—enough to make a jacket. So he cut up that coat and sewed up a jacket. It fit just as well as the coat had and he could wear it even more often—so he did—until it was all worn out. At least he thought it was all worn out. But then he looked and saw there was some good material left—enough to make a vest. So he cut up the jacket, sewed the vest and tried it on. He looked quite distinguished in that vest. He wore it every day. He wore it 'til it was all worn out. At least he thought it was all worn out. But then he looked and here and there were a few bits that weren't worn—so he cut them up and sewed them together and made himself a cap. He looked fine in that cap. He wore that cap outdoors and in. He wore it 'til it was all worn out. At least he thought it was all worn out—but he looked and saw that there was one piece that wasn't worn—so, he made it into a button. It was a good button. He wore that button all the time. He wore it 'til it was all worn out. At least he thought it was all worn out. But then he looked and he saw there was just enough material in that button to make a story out of it. So he made a story out of it—and I just told it to you!²⁵¹

Perhaps creativity doesn't come easily to you. You can't imagine ever writing your own story. Start to think of your imagination as an important exegetical tool.

Biblical interpretation requires the use of our imaginations. Haddon Robinson says,

“I don't believe you can apply or even interpret the Scriptures accurately without

your imagination....Bible stories don't work unless readers see them on the screen of

²⁵¹ A Storytelling Treasury, CD, produced by the National Storytelling Press, Jonesborough, TN, 1993. “The Tailor”, told by Nancy Schimmel.

their minds.”²⁵² Where does the creative process begin? Start by taking a second look.

Take a Second Look

Finding a story idea doesn’t mean finding a new idea. It often involves seeing common things in a new way. Look at the world again. Pause, and look at the things you see every day. When using our imaginations, Thomas Troeger argues that the primary principle is “...that we are attentive to what is.”²⁵³ Poets and artists observe the details of the world with fresh insight. “...they have drawn the raw materials of their creativity from close observation. They have been attentive to how the dawn light suffuses the air, how the snow balances on a bough, how a bird rides on the wind, how everyday speech has a music all its own.”²⁵⁴

Change Your Angle

How is the imagination lured out of the recesses of our minds? In an article entitled “Use Your Imagination”, Haddon Robinson says it all starts with a change in perspective:

“Ernest T. Campbell noted that imagination is stimulated when you change “your angle of vision.” Look at how that works with the biblical text. Imagine that you had been invited to the party the father threw for his delinquent son after the kid came home from his fling in the far country. Would you have attended? If you went, would you have gone to celebrate the lad’s return or simply to enjoy a roast beef dinner? It’s one thing to analyze the party, but imagination allows you to attend it.”²⁵⁵

Now that you are more attentive to the people, scenes and objects around you—start looking at them from a different perspective. Look at the Rose of Sharon

²⁵² Haddon Robinson, “Use Your Imagination” in PreachingToday.com (accessed February 5, 2007).

²⁵³ Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, Tennessee, 1990), 15.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 15.

²⁵⁵ Haddon Robinson, “Use Your Imagination” in PreachingToday.com.

nestled in your front garden. It's a sprawling bush with dark green leaves and bright pink blossoms. They bloom for only a day to make room for new flowering buds. They fall and litter your walkway, turning a pale, dirty pink. You crown them queen when they're seated on the leafy throne, but you step on them when they've fallen from their position of honor. Every time you pass the bush you hear the dull buzz of bees busy at their work of pollination. Imagine yourself as one of the buds that bloom daily and falls daily. Imagine yourself as one of the bees who pollinate it daily. See things from a different perspective.

Jesus masterfully observed the world around him. He created stories based on what he saw. "He did not create his parables from scratch. His stories reveal someone who is attentive to what is, who closely observes common human experience—the relationship of family members, the way people behave in the business world, the life of farmers and shepherds."²⁵⁶

Imagination and Motion

Children's storyteller Odds Bodkin says that "Imagination thrives on motion."²⁵⁷ Your imagination will increase when you think of stories that move. Bodkin describes a snow covered mountaintop and asks how long you can hold the image in your mind. The longer you hold the image, the greater your imagination stamina. Now, imagine you are in a helicopter flying over the snow covered mountaintop. Observe the terrain—jagged rocks, a snow leopard. Most people, Bodkins argues, hold the image for a longer period of time. "Without motion, your

²⁵⁶ Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, 92.

²⁵⁷ Family Education, "Boost Your Imagination,"

<http://school.familyeducation.com/storytelling/persons/38448.html> (accessed June 13, 2007).

imaginary world disappears.”²⁵⁸ Improve your imagination with motion. Similarly, if you want your listeners to imagine what you have pictured in *your* mind’s eye, then you must use motion to guide your hearers.

Summary

Imagination is central to writing stories and sermons that have depth of content and character. Start by seeing ordinary things in a new way. Change the point of view and picture life in someone else’s shoes. Be willing to change the angle and examine things from a different perspective and don’t forget to make your stories move! Your sermons and stories will improve.

Exercise Your Imagination

Exercise #1:

Now you’re ready for an exercise in imagination. Read the following scenario and create the story. Fill in the details using three different perspectives.

It’s a Sunday afternoon. A man and a woman pull up to a gas station located on Main Street. This is what they see: Across the street from the gas station is a cemetery. A car, driven by an elderly man, plods slowly down Main street. The car signals to turn into the graveyard. As the car slows down to take the turn, another car aggressively comes up behind the turning car and lays on its horn. The second car impatiently passes the car that’s turning into the cemetery.

What’s the story from the point of view of the driver of the first car? What’s the story from the point of view of the driver of the second car? Place someone or something else in the scene and imagine the story from their perspective. Describe the setting and make good use of specifics and detail.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

Exercise #2:

Read “The Parable of the Wedding Banquet” found in Matthew 22:1-14.

Imagine an interview with a guest who refused to attend the banquet. Why did that guest ultimately decline the invitation? What’s his view of the king? Next, imagine an interview with a guest who did attend the feast. Ask that guest if they were surprised by the invitation. Did the king make them feel welcome? How were they treated? What did they think of the king? Finally, talk to the guest who did not wear the proper attire. Ask him why he refused the king’s clothing. Ask him how he feels after the banquet. What does he think of the king?

CHAPTER EIGHT

WRITE THAT STORY!

Your imagination is now engaged. You're seeing things with new eyes. You know the elements of a good story. Now, how do you start the actual process of writing a story?

Step I: Examine the Possibilities Surrounding the Idea

Story experts agree that writing should not typically be dictated by an idea. McKee says: "...the story tells you its meaning; you do not dictate meaning to the story. You do not draw action from idea, rather idea from action."²⁵⁹ First, write the story, then, surmise its controlling idea. Stephen King begins his novels with a situation, not a central idea or theme. He doesn't know where he'll end up until he experiences the story himself through writing. He likens writing to excavating fossils. "Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world. The writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of each one out of the ground intact as possible."²⁶⁰ Starting with a theme or idea often results in didacticism.

"When your Premise is an idea you feel you must prove to the world, and you design your story as an undeniable certification of that idea, you set yourself on the road to didacticism. In your zeal to persuade, you will stifle the voice of the other side. Misusing and abusing art to preach, your screenplay will become a thesis film, a thinly disguised sermon as you strive in a single stroke to convert the world. Didacticism results from the naïve enthusiasm that fiction can be used like a scalpel to cut out the cancers of society."²⁶¹

This of course, is a harsh criticism of the use of story to teach lessons—whether they are political, environmental, moral or biblical lessons. Following this

²⁵⁹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 118.

²⁶⁰ Stephen King, *On Writing*, 160.

²⁶¹ Robert McKee, *Story*, 121.

advice seems contrary to all that we've learned about homiletics. Ideas control expository preaching.

If you are writing your own story for a story sermon, then you already have the idea in hand. The idea has been extracted from the biblical text. How can you avoid crafting a story that is superficial and overwhelmingly didactic? By using your imagination! Submit your idea to alternative ideas. Don't change the idea of the biblical text—but analyze your idea in light of other, even opposing ideas. This will make your writing more believable, more real. Imagine the various sides of your idea—the dark side, the ambivalent side, the foolish side. Look at the flipside of the biblical idea. What's at stake if the biblical idea is disregarded or undermined? Take McKee's advice and be willing to entertain other ideas. But these other ideas should be used only in support of your central idea.

“This does not mean that starting with an idea is certain to produce didactic work...but that's the risk. As a story develops, you must willingly entertain opposite, even repugnant ideas. The finest writers have dialectical, flexible minds that easily shift points of view. They see the positive, the negative, and all shades of irony, seeking the truth of these views honestly and convincingly. This omniscience forces them to become even more creative, more imaginative, and more insightful. Ultimately, they express what they deeply believe, but not until they have allowed themselves to weigh each living issue and experience all its possibilities.”²⁶²

Now as you begin to write, you know your idea and all of the angles surrounding it. Perhaps you will arrive at your idea from the backside or the side door. Put your pen to paper and start writing.

Step II: Start with a Situation

Many story experts agree that story starts with a situation. Even before you dream up characters and plot a course for them, begin with a situation or a premise.

²⁶² Robert McKee, Story, 121.

Novelist Stephen King says “The situation comes first. The characters—always flat and unfeatured, to begin with—come next.”²⁶³ The best way to find a situation is to ask ‘what if’ questions.²⁶⁴ Robert McKee says that “Two ideas bracket the creative process: *Premise*, the idea that inspires the writer’s desire to create a story, and *Controlling Idea*, the story’s ultimate meaning...”²⁶⁵ The premise is the situation that gets the story rolling. Robert McKee suggests the following premises for movies:²⁶⁶

- What would happen if a shark swam into a beach resort and devoured a vacationer? JAWS.
- What would happen if a wife walked out on her husband and child? KRAMER VS. KRAMER

“What if?” is only one kind of premise. McKee argues that “Writers find inspiration wherever they turn—in a friend’s light-hearted confession of a dark desire, the jibe of a legless beggar, a nightmare or daydream, a newspaper fact, a child’s fantasy.”²⁶⁷

Imagine the premise used for some of Jesus’ best loved stories:

- What would happen if a son asked his father for his inheritance? THE PRODIGAL SON (Luke 15)
- What would happen if a king canceled the enormous debt of his servant? THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT (Matthew 18:21-35)
- What would happen if the king invited guests to his son’s wedding banquet and they refused to come? THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET (Matthew 22:1-14)
- What would happen if a bad manager was fired by his rich employer? THE PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER (Luke 16:1-8)

²⁶³ Stephen King, *On Writing*, 161.

²⁶⁴ Stephen King, *On Writing*, 166.

²⁶⁵ Robert McKee, *Story*, 112.

²⁶⁶ Robert McKee, *Story*, 112.

²⁶⁷ Robert McKee, *Story*, 112.

Step III: Characterize the Protagonist

Identify the protagonist. Characterize the hero: male or female? Old or young? Wise or foolish? What kind of car does he drive? Is she bitter or sweet? Does he work in a factory or on Wall Street? Is she single, divorced, or married?

Explore your protagonist's character. Will your character choose honesty when a lie would give him an advantage? Will your character fold in a moral dilemma or stand tall? True character is only revealed in a crisis situation. How does your character respond to crisis?

Identify the antagonist. What force opposes your protagonist? When compared to the antagonist, the protagonist should be an underdog. The antagonist should possess more resources, power, notoriety, even more skill or intellect than the protagonist. He cannot be 100% evil.

Step IV: Define the Conflict

Define the inciting incident. What is the conflict that sets the protagonist on her quest for an object of desire? The story is born when the protagonist reacts to the inciting incident and finds that the world does not respond the way he anticipated. He is forced on a journey to restore life back to normalcy. What further obstacles does the hero face in trying to restore life to balance? As the story approaches the climax, the obstacles should increase in emotional intensity.

Step V: Envision the Setting

Where does the conflict take place? Be specific. Sketch out the world of your protagonist.

Step VI: Resolve the Conflict

How does the story resolve itself? Bring your protagonist back to equilibrium. Deal with all antagonistic forces. Restore your hero back to the way life used to be or restore a sense of peace within your protagonist. By the conclusion of the story, your hero should possess fresh insight and understanding.

Summary

Put your pen to your paper and examine all of the angles of your idea. Imagine a situation and place your protagonist in the middle of it. Describe the conflict that will carry the protagonist through the story. Set the conflict in a specific time and place. Resolve the conflict and restore balance to the life of your protagonist.

CHAPTER NINE

TIPS ON TELLING

*When you speak, words are less than 15 percent of what listeners “hear.”*²⁶⁸

Listeners judge us by far more than the words we say. They receive information from our facial expressions, our posture, our gestures, our clothes, our eye movement, our tone and a variety of other non-verbal forms of communication. In order to convey the meaning that we intend to convey, we must learn how to communicate non-verbally as well as verbally.

You’ve written your own story for a story-sermon or you’ve analyzed the elements of an existing one. Now, you’re ready to tell your story. Here are a few tips on telling.

Gestures and Facial Expression

Use gestures to support what you are saying. Paint pictures with your hands. “A modest use of gestures can add meaning to your story, intensify your message, and create a stage upon which your story is played.”²⁶⁹

Use gestures according to your proximity to the audience. Broaden your gestures to communicate far away and shorten them in close quarters.

Use facial expressions in your storytelling. Like gestures, facial expressions support your speech. They can even be used in place of description. Instead of describing your happiness at great length, make a simple statement of glee and accompany it with a broad smile.

²⁶⁸ Annette Simmons, The Story Factor, 86.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 87.

Facial expressions cannot be faked. That's why it's important to know your story well and believe it. Internalize it and experience the emotion of the story so that when you do tell it, you won't be faking facial expressions. Annette Simmons says that "Actors and actresses don't study the anatomy of which muscles paint joy on their face. They study how to conjure up joy in their mind and body because they know that when they feel joy, joy will show on their face."²⁷⁰

Body Language

Use your entire body to convey meaning. Try imitating a high school quarterback who just threw the winning touchdown or a 16 year old girl whose date just stood her up. Use your body to imitate a cocky CEO or an exhausted housewife. Use your body as a trigger to memory. Position yourself in a certain place on the platform when you talk about a specific character or event. Return to that spot whenever you come back to that character or event.

Use the Senses

Use your five senses to draw listeners into your story. Tell your story with a prop. It doesn't have to be elaborate. Choose something that listeners can clearly see. The object should reinforce some aspect of a character in your story or an important event. Some storytellers are better at conjuring up sounds than others, like the 'beep', 'beep' of a garbage truck backing up or the whistle of a badminton birdie. Experiment with sound. Use touch in your storytelling. Describe the rough surface of a playground blacktop or the smooth surface of sea glass. Taste and smell can be described in ways that make saliva glands drip and nostrils flair. Talk about the sour

²⁷⁰ Annette Simmons, The Story Factor, 90.

lemon wedge your two-year old loves to suck on or the smell of your Terrier after he was sprayed by a skunk.

Use Detail

Don't give us generic details. Describe the scene so that we can picture it to the last detail. Details make a story stand out. Saying 'a man crossed the street' conjures up a fuzzy, non-descript picture. A more specific picture is conveyed by saying: 'Traffic screeched to a halt as he dodged cars at the intersection of Main and Elm. He crossed so fast that the blur of his frayed black trench coat and bright white sneakers was all that could be seen. Be concrete and specific. Steve Mathewson says "Stories that engage my interest use vivid words and draw concrete pictures. Good preachers don't settle for generic descriptions. They paint specific pictures."²⁷¹

Pace your story according to the events of the story. Quickened your pace as you describe the man with the trench coat and sneakers crossing the street. Slow down as you talk about two love birds watching the sunset from their front porch swing.

Use volume effectively. People don't want to be shouted at through your entire story. They also don't want to strain to hear you. Try using the lower registers of your voice to emphasize a point as opposed to the upper registers. Emphasis is powerfully conveyed in quiet tones.

Listeners place a high priority on the tone of your voice. If you sound uncertain, prideful, nervous or self-righteous, your listeners will immediately pick up on it and judge you for it.

²⁷¹ Steve Mathewson, "Vitality of Specifics: Choosing the best words to tell the story" in PreachingToday.com, (accessed April 22, 2007).

Be Yourself

Storytellers often sound informal in their speaking. They use everyday language and aren't theatrical in their telling. Their telling is an extension of their own personalities. Even so, storytellers work hard at crafting their stories. Important phrases are often repeated and some wording is remembered precisely.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION OF THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

I had the opportunity to teach MDiv students how to prepare and deliver an expository story-sermon in an elective class I taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. *Preaching and Storytelling* was taught during the spring semester of 2007. Ten students were enrolled in the class. We met for three hours each week. The semester was 12 weeks long.

My Teaching Experience

Preaching and Storytelling was not solely dedicated to the preparation and delivery of expository story sermons. We also spent time talking about first-person narratives and role-play preaching.²⁷² Students listened to professional storytellers perform their craft. We heard numerous storytellers on CD and Jan Carlberg, a Christian storyteller came to class and mesmerized us with her tales from home.

One three hour class was a workshop on imagination. They were given a scenario that lacked many details. Students were asked to fill in the blanks and create three stories from three different perspectives. The stories that came out of this class were amazing! Students impressed me with their ability to be creative, intelligent and think out of the box. Next, we turned to Scripture to look at the women who were present at the cross. We used our imaginations to understand the cross from their perspective. We imagined the mother of James and John standing in the shadow of the cross. We pictured her replaying the conversation she had with Jesus when she

²⁷² Each student was required to write a drama based on a biblical text.

asked for her sons to sit at His right and left hand. We envisioned her recalling Jesus' response and being filled with dread as she suddenly realizes what she was asking.

Students were given the option of preaching an expository story sermon or a first-person narrative for their final sermon. Half of the class chose to preach an expository story sermon. Their sermons were fantastic!

What I learned from my teaching experience

Class evaluations and discussions with students revealed that students were overloaded with the work load. Next time, I would have fewer required readings. I also need to keep a keener eye on the clock as I facilitate discussion. If my objectives were clearer, my lecturing and facilitating might have been improved.

Overall, students believe that storytelling has a place in expository preaching. Students also thought that their storytelling improved over the course of the semester.

At the conclusion of the semester I was even more convinced of the power of story in expository preaching. I was delighted with my students and happy to see them learn and enjoy learning. One student wrote in a class evaluation:

“This is one of the most influential classes I have ever taken. With some improvement in the lectures and some clear boundaries in class discussion times, this class will be one of the best offered in the preaching department at GCTS.”

APPENDIX #1

The following story sermon was preached by Patricia Batten on Children's Sunday at Village Baptist Church in Kennebunkport, Maine. The entire congregation participated in the story by responding "who, who" whenever the storyteller mentioned Mrs. Who. The sermon is based on Matthew 7:6: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Once upon a time there was a great kingdom filled with animals. In the animal kingdom lived a very wise owl named Mrs. Who. She had eyes like green apples and wings of dark feathers and little wire spectacles that wrapped around her temples. All of the animals went to see Mrs. Who for wisdom. She taught the lions about strength and courage; the birds about living each day by faith and the eagles about humility and pride. Most importantly, she taught all of the animals about God. “God created you,” said Mrs. Who. “God loves you.” And whenever Mrs. Who said “God loves you,” the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky.

Although all of the animals were part of the animal kingdom, the kingdom was divided. Some of the animals believed what Mrs. Who taught; others did not. You see, packs of wolves roamed freely throughout the kingdom. They didn’t give a hoot about Mrs. Who and her wisdom. They sneered and they snarled at those who believed in God. They were waiting to pounce and yell ‘fraud.’

One morning when the sun was bright and the breeze was light, Mrs. Who gathered some lion cubs under her wings. “Do you believe what I’ve taught about God?” They all replied “yes,” with a nod. “Then stay close to Him, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to steal you away.”

But later that day, while the cubs were at play, their lives were changed. Little Larry Lion tossed and tumbled and rolled and rumbled all the way down a hill. He landed in a pack of wolverines. They taunted and teased and little Larry lion yelled ‘please.’ They said, ‘become like us; tear others apart; gossip and swear; lie and cheat; steal and be unfair.’ But Larry Lion remembered what Mrs. Who said, ‘stay

close to God, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to steal you away.’ With all his might, Larry Lion escaped. He ran up the hill and went straight to his den.

The next day, Mrs. Who was teaching the animals. “God loves you,” screeched Mrs. Who. Upon hearing those words the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky. “Stay close to God, do not stray because wolves are waiting to steal you away,” said Mrs. Who. And little Larry Lion knew that to be true.

That day, all of Larry Lion’s friends were away. With whom would he play? So he walked across the field, then through a brook and then through a thicket where he met up with Carl the Cricket. Larry the Lion liked Carl the Cricket, but Carl was too small to roll and rumble around. When Carl got tired of hopping, he rode on Larry’s back. As they were walking, Carl spotted some movement. A pack of wolves was heading their way. “Let’s play,” said the wolves. “OK.” So they rolled and they rumbled, they tossed and they tumbled. But Carl the Cricket stayed at a safe distance and attached himself to a tall blade of grass. Then came an old sheep who was lost from the flock. “Let’s hide,” said the wolves, “and shear some of his wool.” Larry the Lion was unsure of the idea, but he thought it’d be fun to take part in the shear. So the unsuspecting sheep approached the pack, not knowing anything of the imminent attack.

Meanwhile Carl the Cricket had made his way back, “Mrs. Who, Mrs. Who,” he chirped. “Mrs. Who, Mrs. Who, I need you.” Mrs. Who was in the middle of a lesson. “God loves you,” said Mrs. Who. And at that the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high

into the sky. “Mrs. Who—I need you.” “What is it?” cried Mrs. Who. “It’s Larry the Lion—he’s playing with wolves!”

Mrs. Who wasted no time, she flew up to the sky and prayed the whole way—“Lord God, help Larry the Lion not to stray, for wolves are waiting to steal him away.”

But down on the field the wolves made their move—they lunged from the woods and attacked that poor ewe. Larry the Lion was with them. With their teeth, they sheared that poor sheep—until nothing was left of his thick white wool. Then they pushed him on his way, shivering and cold. But Larry too felt cold—the cold shivers of remorse. He had given into the wolves. So he turned to the wolves and said with great strength, “I follow God—not your evil way.” But the wolves snarled and sneered and said, “then why did you join us in shearing that sheep? You are all alike—you animals who follow God. You’re fakes and phonies.” To that, Larry had nothing to say, not even a peep.

He went to go, with his head hung low, but the wolves turned on him. They surrounded him and attacked. Just as Larry was about to collapse, who from the sky swooped down to the ground? It was Mrs. Who. She screeched and she howled and scared off that pack. She tended to Larry and safely brought him back.

The animal kingdom had always been divided—those who believed what Mrs. Who taught, and those who did not. Mrs. Who gathered the animals and she taught them this lesson: “Stay close to God, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to steal you away.” And then Mrs. Who added, “but if you stray, you can always come back because God loves you, and that’s a fact.” At that, all of the animals rejoiced.

The bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky. And Larry the Lion looked at Mrs. Who, he smiled and said ‘Teacher, thank you.’

Your life as a believer in Jesus Christ is special. It ought to be carefully safeguarded. Don’t throw it to the wolves. If you do, they’ll tear you apart and do damage to the faith.²⁷³

²⁷³ See Haddon Robinson’s discussion on Matthew 7:6 in What Jesus Said About Successful Living.

APPENDIX #2

The following version of Mrs. Who indicates
where storytelling principles are at work.

Protagonist—Larry the Lion. Our protagonist makes choices throughout the story.

Some are good, some are bad.

Antagonist—The Wolves

Conflict—The conflict is seen at three levels. *Inner conflict*—Larry the Lion battles his conscience. He knows what Mrs. Who has taught, but he is tempted to ignore her wisdom. *Personal Conflict*—There is a physical battle between the wolves (plus Larry) and the lone sheep. Larry also finds himself in a vicious battle with the wolves, who quickly turn on him. *Extra-personal Conflict*—Although it's not explicitly stated, Larry's battle points us to a larger one of good vs. evil.

Summer—*All is well in the animal kingdom.*

Once upon a time there was a great kingdom filled with animals. In the animal kingdom lived a very wise owl named Mrs. Who. She had eyes like green apples and wings of dark feathers and little wire spectacles that wrapped around her temples. All of the animals went to see Mrs. Who for wisdom. She taught the lions about strength and courage; the birds about living each day by faith and the eagles about humility and pride. Most importantly, she taught all of the animals about God. “God created you,” said Mrs. Who. “God loves you.” **And whenever Mrs. Who said “God loves you,” the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky.** [*Repetition—this phrase is repeated throughout the story*]

One morning when the sun was bright and the breeze was light, Mrs. Who gathered some lion cubs under her wings. “Do you believe what I’ve taught about

God?” They all replied “yes,” with a nod. **“Then stay close to Him, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to steal you away.”** *[Repetition—this phrase is repeated throughout the story]*

Fall—*we start to see that the kingdom is not perfect. There is tension within the kingdom.*

Although all of the animals were part of the animal kingdom, the kingdom was divided. Some of the animals believed what Mrs. Who taught; others did not. You see, packs of wolves roamed freely throughout the kingdom. They didn’t give a hoot about Mrs. Who and her wisdom. They sneered and they snarled at those who believed in God. They were waiting to pounce and yell ‘fraud.’

The Inciting Event—*Larry the Lion tumbles right into a pack of wolves where he is taunted and teased. He meets with the enemy face to face and must choose how he will respond. Larry’s life is ‘thrown off balance’ when he experiences first-hand the wicked ways of the wolves. Larry has experienced the other side of the kingdom. His Object of Desire is to ‘stay close to God’ and ‘not stray.’ He must keep as far away from the wolves as possible.*

But later that day, while the cubs were at play, their lives were changed. Little Larry Lion tossed and tumbled and rolled and rumbled all the way down a hill. He landed in a pack of wolverines. They taunted and teased and little Larry lion yelled ‘please.’ They said, ‘become like us; tear others apart; gossip and swear; lie and cheat; steal and be unfair.’ But Larry Lion remembered what Mrs. Who said, ‘stay

close to God, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to steal you away.’ With all his might, Larry Lion escaped. He ran up the hill and went straight to his den.

The next day, Mrs. Who was teaching the animals. **“God loves you,” screeched Mrs. Who. Upon hearing those words the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky. “Stay close to God, do not stray because wolves are waiting to steal you away,” said Mrs. Who. [Repetition]** And little Larry Lion knew that to be true.

Winter—*As Larry tries to pursue his object of desire (staying close to God and far from wolves), he is tempted to leave behind all that Mrs. Who has taught. Larry succumbs to that temptation and finds himself in the dead of winter.*

That day, all of Larry Lion’s friends were away. With whom would he play? So he walked across the field, then through a brook and then through a thicket where he met up with Carl the Cricket. Larry the Lion liked Carl the Cricket, but Carl was too small to roll and rumble around. When Carl got tired of hopping, he rode on Larry’s back. As they were walking, Carl spotted some movement. A pack of wolves was heading their way. “Let’s play,” said the wolves. “OK.” *[Larry makes the decision to play with wolves. He wants to follow God and not stray, but he also wants to have fun while his friends are away. This is a choice of ‘irreconcilable goods.’]* So they rolled and they rumbled, they tossed and they tumbled. But Carl the Cricket stayed at a safe distance and attached himself to a tall blade of grass. Then came an old sheep who was lost from the flock. “Let’s hide,” said the wolves,

“and shear some of his wool.” Larry the Lion was unsure of the idea, but he thought it’d be fun to take part in the shear. So the unsuspecting sheep approached the pack, not knowing anything of the immanent attack.

Meanwhile Carl the Cricket had made his way back, “Mrs. Who, Mrs. Who,” he chirped. “Mrs. Who, Mrs. Who, I need you.” Mrs. Who was in the middle of a lesson. **“God loves you,” said Mrs. Who. And at that the bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky. [Repetition]** “Mrs. Who—I need you.” “What is it?” cried Mrs. Who. “It’s Larry the Lion—he’s playing with wolves!”

Mrs. Who wasted no time, she flew up to the sky and prayed the whole way—“Lord God, help Larry the Lion not to stray, for wolves are waiting to steal him away.”

But down on the field the wolves made their move—they lunged from the woods and attacked that poor ewe. Larry the Lion was with them. With their teeth, they sheared that poor sheep—until nothing was left of his thick white wool. Then they pushed him on his way, shivering and cold. *[Larry makes a poor decision. He desires two things—to follow God on the one hand and to follow the wolves. This is a choice of ‘irreconcilable goods.’ We see a glimpse of his character when he is under pressure]* But Larry too felt cold—the cold shivers of remorse. He had given into the wolves. Larry couldn’t help but weep. He determined to help that poor sheep. So he turned to the wolves and said with great strength, “I follow God—not your evil way.” *[Larry is forced to make another choice—the choice to roam with the wolves or to stand up to them and risk being eaten. Larry is beginning to step up to the*

plate. Again, this decision to speak up is made in a pressure situation] But the wolves snarled and sneered and said, “then why did you join us in shearing that sheep? You are all alike—you animals who follow God. You’re fakes and phonies.” To that, Larry had nothing to say, not even a peep.

[The worst of winter is here. There doesn’t seem to be a way back to spring.]

He went to go, with his head hung low, but the wolves turned on him. They surrounded him and attacked.

Surprising Twist in the Plot Propels us into Spring—*To Larry’s utter surprise, Mrs. Who swoops out of the sky and saves him. He will not die at the hand of the wolves.*

Just as Larry was about to collapse, who from the sky swooped down to the ground? It was Mrs. Who. She screeched and she howled and scared off that pack. She tended to Larry and safely brought him back.

Summer—*Mrs. Who tends to Larry and assures Larry of God’s forgiveness. Larry is a changed lion. He participated in sinful behavior and felt remorse. His follies provided the perfect opportunity for him to be pounced upon. He was saved and forgiven. Now when Mrs. Who says ‘God loves you,’ Larry understands it in a whole new way. Our protagonist has learned.*

The animal kingdom had always been divided—those who believed what Mrs. Who taught, and those who did not. Mrs. Who gathered the animals and she taught them this lesson: “Stay close to God, do not stray, because wolves are waiting to

steal you away.” And then Mrs. Who added, ‘but if you stray, you can always come back because God loves you, and that’s a fact.’” At that, all of the animals rejoiced.

The bunnies flapped their floppy ears; the elephants raised their tremendous trunks and the eagles soared high into the sky. [Repetition] And Larry the Lion looked at Mrs. Who, he smiled and said ‘Teacher, thank you.’

[The central idea is clearly stated in this conclusion. The story will also work without stating the idea explicitly.]

Your life as a believer in Jesus Christ is special. It ought to be carefully safeguarded. Don’t throw it to the wolves. If you do, they’ll tear you apart and do damage to the faith.

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